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Translated by PHYLLIS MÉGROZ

THE RIPENING CORN

by

COLETTE

LONDON
VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD
14 Henrietta Street Covent Garden

THE RIPENING CORN is a translation of *Le Blé
en Herbe*, which was published in Paris in 1923

Printed in Great Britain by
The Camelot Press Ltd., London and Southampton
on paper supplied by Spalding & Hodge Ltd.
and bound by The Leighton-Straker Bookbinding Co. Ltd.

I

I

“ Are you going fishing, Vinca ? ”

With a brief nod, Periwinkle—
Vinca for short—whose eyes were
the rain-washed blue of spring skies,
intimated that she certainly was going
fishing. Her darned sweater and her
bathing-shoes hardened with salt bore
witness to her intentions, and it was
plain that the three-year-old checked
blue and green skirt which left her
knees bare was sacred to the crabs
and shrimps. The rest of her outfit
included two shrimping-nets which she

carried over her shoulder, and a fluffy blue woollen beret which looked like the teasels that grew on the sand-hills.

She passed her questioner, and, taking big strides with her thin, well-shaped legs, sunburnt to the colour of earthenware, came down towards the rocks. Philip watched her progress, and compared her mentally with the Vinca of last holidays. Has she finished growing? he thought. It's quite time. She's just as thin this year as she was then. She's been letting her hair grow for the last four months, and now it spreads out like straw with a golden glint on it, and she can't plait it or put it up. Her face and arms are burnt black with the sun, but her neck's as white as milk under her hair. She smiles self-consciously, but her laugh's absolutely natural, and, although she's always fastening her sweaters and jumpers in front, when she's going to paddle she tucks up her

skirts and knickers as high as she can with all the unconcern of a small boy. . . .

Vinca's friend was watching her from where he lay full-length on the grassy sand-hill, his cleft chin resting on his crossed arms. He is sixteen-and-a-half, Vinca fifteen-and-a-half. Just as childhood has united them, so adolescence is separating them. A year ago, they were exchanging sharp words and sly blows, but now silence falls on them so heavily at every moment that they would rather sulk alone than bother to talk. But Philip, who is subtle, a born hunter and deceiver, cloaks his silence in mystery, and turns his weaknesses into defences. He makes great play with ironical gestures, mutters tentatively : " What's the use of it all ? . . . You don't understand . . . " ; while Vinca, on the contrary, can only remain dumb, suffering from her inhibitions and from everything she longs to understand ; forcing herself not

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to give in to her precocious and overmastering desire to surrender completely, trying to shut out the fear that Philip (who is changing daily, and outstripping her from hour to hour) will break the fragile link that brings him back every year to the thicket overlooking the sea, and to the rocks festooned with black seaweed. Already he has a sinister habit of looking at her intently without seeing her, as though she were transparent, impalpable, imperceptible. . . .

Next year, perhaps, she will fall at his feet, and utter words that are not little-girl talk : " Don't be cruel, Phil. . . . I love you, Phil ; do anything you like with me. . . . Talk to me, Phil." But this year she still hides behind a child's obstinate dignity, she resists him, and Phil hates her resistance.

He watched the slight and charming figure going down to the sea. He didn't wish to make love to her, any more than

he wanted to beat her, but he did want her confidence to be his, and no one else's ; he wanted it to be as much in his keeping as the collection over which he blushed a little—a heterogeneous accumulation of pressed flowers, agate marbles, shells and silkworms' eggs, pictures, a small silver watch. . . .

“ Wait for me, Vinca ! I'm coming fishing with you,” he called.

She slowed down without turning round. He overtook her with a few steps, and helped himself to one of the shrimping-nets.

“ Why did you bring two ? ” he asked.

“ I brought the small net for the tiny pools, and I brought the big one because I always do.”

He looked into her blue eyes with his softer dark glance.

“ You didn't bring it for me, then ? ” he said.

As he spoke, he held out his hand to

help her over the awkward rocks, and Vinca blushed under her tan. An unexpected gesture, an unexpected look, were enough to confuse her. Yesterday, they had climbed the cliffs and explored the deep pools side by side, both of them at their own peril. . . . As active as he, she couldn't remember having asked Phil to help her. . . .

"I say, Vinca, don't be so violent," he protested, smiling, as she withdrew her hand abruptly. "Why are you angry with me?"

She bit her lip, cracked by the salty waves, and clambered up the rocks that bristled with limpets. Her mind was confused. What was the matter with him? Why was he being so considerate and thoughtful, offering her his hand as though she were a lady? Slowly she dipped her net into a pool where, beneath the limpid water, she could see seaweed, sea-cucumbers, sea-anemones, small black crabs with red markings,

and shrimps. Philip's shadow fell across the sunny pool.

"Move away ; I can't see the shrimps with you standing there ; and anyhow, this is *my* pool."

Philip stood aside, and she fished by herself, but she was impatient and less skilful than usual. As she plunged the net too hurriedly into the pool, ten shrimps, twenty shrimps, escaped her, and scuttled away to lurk in the crevices where, once safe, they flirted their delicate whiskers in the water, and defied attack. . . .

"Phil—do come, Phil ! This pool's simply full of shrimps, and they just won't be caught !" she called.

Leisurely he came up to her, and bent over the teeming little pool.

"Of course they won't be caught," he said. "You don't know how to catch them, that's why."

"I do know how to catch them, only I'm too impatient," cried Vinca crossly.

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Phil sank the net into the water, and let it stop there.

"There are some beauties in that crack on the rock," whispered Vinca. "Don't you see their whiskers sticking out?"

"No, but it doesn't matter—they'll come along in a minute."

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course I think so. Look."

She leant nearer, and her hair, like a wing, fluttered against his cheek. She drew back, then took an unconscious step closer, only to draw back once more. Phil pretended not to notice, but with his free hand he caught hold of Vinca's sunburned, salt-stung arm.

"Look, Vinca—here come the big ones. . . ."

Vinca's arm slipped as far as her wrist into Phil's hand, as though she were slipping it into a bracelet, so lightly was he holding it.

“ See that big one, Phil—you’ll never catch it. . . . ”

As she watched the shrimp’s antics, Vinca let Phil’s half-closed hand rest round her elbow. In the green water, the huge shrimp, the colour of grey agate, frisked his feelers, and then his whiskers, on the brink of the net. One turn of the wrist and . . . but the fisherman hesitated, perhaps enjoying the sensation of Vinca’s arm in his hand, the weight of her head leaning submissively for a moment against his shoulder, before he made a sudden abrupt movement. . . .

“ Quick, Phil, quick, draw up the net. . . . Oh, it’s gone. Why did you let it go ? ”

Phil drew a deep breath, and gave Vinca a glance in which astonished pride was mixed with disparagement of his victory ; he let go of her thin arm, although she had made no protesting movement, and, thrashing the clear

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water into a whirlpool with the net,
he said carelessly :

“ Oh, the shrimp will come back all
right. It only means waiting. . . . ”

II

II

They were swimming side by side. He was the whiter-skinned of the two, and his wet black hair lay close to his head ; she was sun-bronzed, and a blue scarf was tied about her curls. At the age they had reached, their daily bathe, those perfect moments when words were unnecessary, not only troubled their peace of mind and their childhood, but endangered them. Vinca floated on her back, spouting out water like a baby seal. The tightly-tied scarf revealed the small pink ears which her hair hid in

the daytime, and the milky skin of her temples, only visible when she bathed. She smiled at Philip, and beneath the rays of the morning sun the lovely blue of her eyes seemed to reflect the green of the sea. Phil dived suddenly, caught hold of Vinca's foot, and dragged her under a wave. They swallowed simultaneously, reappeared choking, panting, and laughing, as though they had forgotten, she her fifteen-year-old unhappy love for her babyhood's playmate, he his sixteen masterful birthdays, his usual attitude of superiority, and his precocious insistence on his rights over her.

"Let's swim to the rocks," he called, cutting through the water.

Vinca, however, did not follow him, but swam the short distance back to the sand.

"Aren't you going to stop in any longer?" he asked.

Vinca pulled off her scarf, much as though she were scalping herself, and shook out her stiff yellow hair.

"We've got a man coming to lunch. Father told me to put on a decent frock."

She began to run, streaming wet, boyishly-built, but yet delicately-made, with well-shaped limbs and firm muscles. A word from Phil stopped her.

"You're dressing up. What about me? I suppose I shan't be able to wear my open shirt?"

"Yes, of course you can. Wear what you like. Anyway, you look much nicer in it."

Vinca's small, sunburnt, dripping face, Vinca's eyes, seemed suddenly to express a longing, an entreaty, an unreasonable desire for appreciation. But Philip remained stubbornly silent, and Vinca clambered up the meadow starred with scabious.

Left alone, Phil muttered to himself, and churned up the waves. Much he cared about Vinca's preferences. "I'm always good enough for her . . . besides,

she's never satisfied with anything this year ! ”

But the apparent contradiction of these two sallies made him laugh. He turned over on his back, and the salt water streaming into his ears filled them with a rumbling sound. A tiny cloud went over the sun, and Phil, opening his eyes, saw two curlews, with their shadowy under-feathers and long, sharp beaks, in full flight above his head.

“ Of all the mad ideas,” Philip was saying to himself. “ Whatever’s got into her head ? She looks like a monkey dressed up, or a mulatto going to church.”

Vinca’s small sister, sitting beside her was almost exactly like her, with wide blue eyes in a round sunburnt face and a stiff thatch of yellow hair ; like a well-behaved child, she rested her tightly-closed hands on the table-cloth near her plate. Both big and little

sister were dressed alike in starched and ironed frocks of white frilled organdie.

"Oh, Lord, Sunday in Tahiti!" Philip thought ironically. "I've never seen her look such a sight."

Vinca's mother, her father, her aunt, Phil and his people, and the visitor from Paris, made a pattern of green sweaters, striped blazers, and tussore shirts about the table. The villa which the two families took every year was redolent this morning of hot rolls and furniture-polish. The grey-headed visitor from Paris, with his impeccable clothes and his city complexion made a piquant contrast to the sunburnt children and the bathers in their multi-coloured attire.

"How you've changed, my child!" he said, turning to Vinca.

"She's changed right enough!" muttered Phil crossly.

The visitor leant over to Vinca's mother.

"She's developing into a beauty," he told her, lowering his voice. "In another two years . . ."

Vinca overheard, and threw him a smiling and provocative glance. Her parted lips revealed her small white teeth, and she drooped her long fair lashes over eyes that were as blue as her name-flower. Even Phil was struck by this new aspect of Vinca.

"What's the matter with her," he thought again.

In the verandah, under the awning, Vinca poured out the coffee. She did it neatly and deftly, lending the simple act the grace of an acrobatic feat. A gust of wind shook the fragile table, but Vinca stopped a chair from falling with her foot, caught a lace napkin, that was being blown away, under her chin, and never paused in her task of pouring a steady stream of coffee into one of the cups.

"Good for you, Vinca," said the visitor enthusiastically.

He began to compare her to a Tana-gra figurine, insisted on her sipping some Chartreuse, and wanted to know whose hearts she had broken at the Cancale casino.

“The Cancale casino ! There isn’t a casino at Cancale,” laughed Vinca, again displaying her white teeth, and twirling on the tips of her white shoes like a ballet-dancer. With the art of flirtation, she was acquiring guile, and she studiously avoided looking at Philip, who stared at her suddenly from behind the piano, above the massed teasels in the copper jug.

“I was wrong about her,” he told himself. “She’s lovely. Another surprise for me.”

Somebody had started the gramophone, and the visitor asked Vinca to show him the latest dance-step. Philip slipped out of the room, ran down to the front, and collapsed in a heap in a hollow of the sand-hill, where he laid

his head on his arms, and his arms on his knees. A new Vinca, an alluring and independent Vinca, a Vinca fully conscious of her charms, and miraculously clothed in feminine fascination, an utterly delightful and captious Vinca, danced before his closed eyes.

“Phil ! Phil dear ! I’ve been looking everywhere for you. . . . What’s the matter with you ? ”

The enchantress, completely out of breath, was standing beside him, ingenuously pulling handfuls of his hair to make him look up.

“There’s nothing the matter,” he said in a hoarse voice. He opened his eyes fearfully. There she was, kneeling on the sand, crushing the ten frills of her organdie frock, and trailing herself along like a squaw.

“Phil, please don’t be cross. Have I done anything to annoy you ? You know perfectly well, Phil, that I love

you best in the world. Say something, please, Phil."

He looked at her, trying to see that ephemeral radiance that had so disturbed him. But he only saw a Vinca full of dismay, an adolescent child burdened too soon with the self-abasement, the clumsiness, and the sorrowful persistence of love. . . . He snatched away the hand she was kissing.

"Go away," he said. "You don't understand. You never understand anything. . . . Get up, can't you?"

And as he smoothed out her crumpled dress, re-tied the ribbon of her sash, and arranged her hair that the wind had blown on end, he tried to see in her once again the shape of that half-glimpsed loveliness. . . .

III

III

“The holidays will be over in another three weeks.”

“In a month,” said Vinca. “You know perfectly well that I shall be in Paris on September 20th.”

“Why? Your father is on leave until October 1st every year.”

“Yes, but mother and Lisette and I haven’t much time between September 20th and October 1st to get ready for the autumn—new frocks and coats, a hat for me and Lisette. . . . We women, you know . . .”

Phil, lying on his back, threw handfuls of sand in the air.

“ Oh, Lord ! We women ! You and Lisette ! What a bother you’re making about it ! ”

“ We have to bother. It’s different for you. You find everything ready for you on your bed, and the only things you trouble about are your shoes, and you buy them at that shop where your father won’t allow you to go. Apart from that, your outfit seems to grow by magic—men are lucky ! ”

Philip sat up with a jerk, ready with an ironical reply. But Vinca was perfectly serious. She was sewing, putting a rose-pink edging to a *crêpe* frock, the exact blue of her eyes. Her fair hair, cut square like a mediæval page’s, was gradually growing. Sometimes she parted it at the nape of her neck, and tied it with blue ribbon in two corn-coloured strands at each side of her face. However, she had lost one of the ribbons since

breakfast, and the loosened hair, like the spread wing of a bird, flapped over one cheek.

Philip frowned at her.

"How rottenly you've done your hair, Vinca."

She flushed under her tan, and, pushing the hair back behind her ears, gave him a downcast look.

"I know it's frightful," she told him. "It will look frightful until my hair is a bit longer. This is only a makeshift. . . ."

"You don't mind if you do look frightful in the meantime, then?" he said unkindly.

"I swear I mind, Phil."

Disarmed by her gentleness, he was silent, and she turned surprised eyes on him, for she had not expected him to stop taunting her. The truce was brief, however, and he overwhelmed her with reproaches and childish sarcasms. But she only smiled vaguely and rather

safely at the smooth sea and the sky with its wind-blown wraiths of cloud.

"I do care very much," she said at last. "I do want to be pretty, and mother says it's quite likely that I shall be pretty, only I must wait."

Her fifteen-year-old body, exercised with walking, firm and lean and hardened, sometimes seemed as unpliant as a broomstick, but her lovely blue eyes, and the fresh curve of her mouth, were present proofs of beauty to come. . . .

"'Wait' ! I'm sick of that word," said Phil, getting up and scraping dry sand and small empty shells from his shoes. The hateful syllable had shattered his holiday peace : although his sixteen-year-old self had to put up with inaction, the very thought of waiting, the mere idea of patient evolution, infuriated him. He inflated his chest, and shook his clenched fists defiantly at the world about him.

“ ‘ Wait ! ’ ” he said angrily. “ The whole lot of you parrot that word—you, my father, the profs. Oh, Lord ! ”

Vinca stopped sewing, and looked at him admiringly. The transition stage which he had reached had not spoilt him ; black-haired, white-skinned, slender, he grew slowly, and since his fourteenth birthday he had already looked like a miniature man, each successive year adding a few inches to his height.

“ What else can we do but wait, Phil ? ” asked Vinca. “ We must wait. Do you really believe that if you stretch out your arms and say ‘ Oh Lord ! ’ you’ll change anything ? You’re no cleverer than anyone else. You’ll go in for your exam, and if you’re lucky, you’ll scrape through. . . . ”

“ Shut up ! ” he shouted. “ You talk like my mother.”

“ Well, you talk like a baby. What do

you hope to get, baby, with all your impatience ? ”

Phil gave her a look of hatred out of his black eyes. How dared she call him “ baby ” ?

“ I don’t hope for anything,” he said tragically. “ And what’s more, I don’t even hope that you’ll understand me. There you sit with your pink embroidery, and babble about your outings, your affairs, and so on and so forth. . . . Why, when I think that I’m almost sixteen and a half . . . ”

Vinca’s blue eyes managed to smile through tears of humiliation.

“ Because you’re sixteen, you think you own the earth, don’t you ? Is that what the films do for you ? ”

Phil caught hold of her shoulder, and shook her masterfully.

“ Didn’t I tell you to shut up ? Every time you open your mouth you say something idiotic. . . . I’m bursting, bursting, I tell you, when I realise that

I'm only sixteen. Think of the years and years of hesitation and uncertainty, years and years of cramming the same indigestible stuff twice over into myself because I've been ploughed. . . . And all through those years I've got to pretend to my people that I'm keen on my career, or else they'll be disappointed, and I've got to let them think that they understand me thoroughly, although they really know no more about me than I know about myself. . . . Oh, Vinca, Vinca, I do hate being so young. Why can't I skip the time until I'm twenty-five ? ”

He smouldered with resentment and a kind of deep-rooted despair. In his hurry to grow up, in his hatred of that stage he had reached when both body and soul are suffering from growing-pains, this son of a middle-class family was metamorphosed into a legendary hero. He flung himself down at Vinca's feet, and continued his lament :

"All these ages and ages, Vinca, I'm only almost a man, only half-free, only on the brink of love."

She put her hand on his wind-blown hair, and kept her instinctive knowledge to herself.

"Only on the brink of love?" she said. "Is that as far as we can get?"

Phil rounded on her violently.

"You put up with it all," he interjected. "You put up with it all, but what are you going to do?"

She wavered a little under his dark glance.

"I shall go on doing what I always do. I'm not trying for a degree."

"What are you going to be? Are you going to take up poster-designing, or are you going in for medicine?"

"Mother says . . ."

Still lying there, he stamped with fury, like a colt.

"Mother says! Mother says! Oh,

you slavish little creature ! What does ‘ mother ’ say ? ”

“ She says that she’s got rheumatism,” said Vinca, unperturbed. “ She says that Lisette is only eight, and that there’s plenty I can do at home without looking anywhere else. She says that soon I can begin housekeeping—keep an eye on the maids, see what lessons Lisette is doing, and all that sort of thing. . . .”

“ That sort of thing ! Less than nothing, in fact ! ”

“ She says I shall marry. . . .”

She blushed as she spoke, took her hand away from Philip’s hair, and seemed to be waiting for a remark that was not forthcoming.

“ And so, you see, until I do marry, I shall have heaps to do. . . .”

He whirled about, and gave her a contemptuous glance from head to foot.

“ That’s enough for you, is it ? That’s

enough for you for—let me think—five or six years, or even longer? ”

Her blue eyes wavered, but she still kept them fixed on his face.

“ Yes, Phil, it’s enough for me for the present. After all, you’re only sixteen, and I’m fifteen . . . and as we have to wait . . . ”

The detestable word struck him full force, and he weakened. Once more Vinca’s single-mindedness, the patience that she acknowledged, her feminine acceptance of the old domestic traditions, had silenced him, leaving him disappointed and yet vaguely pacified. Would he have welcomed a different sort of Vinca, a Vinca full of animal spirits, out for adventure, stamping with impatience, like a bridled filly, on the outskirts of the long, troublesome road of adolescence? . . .

He leaned his head against her frock. He felt her knees give a little quiver, and then press closer together, and, with

a sudden access of emotion, Philip pictured their delicate outlines. But he closed his eyes, allowed his head to rest there confidingly, and so stayed, waiting. . . .

IV

IV

Philip was the first to reach the road—two tracks of sand, ridged like a wave, on either side of a bank whose grass was salt-bitten and sparse. This was the track taken by the carts on their way to gather the sea-wrack thrown up after high tide. He rested against the nets ; the fishing-baskets were slung over his shoulders, but he had allowed Vinca to carry the baited hooks, as well as his fishing-blazer, that treasured garment whose sleeves he had hacked off. He treated himself to a well-earned rest as

he, condescended to wait for Vinca, whom he had left in the maze of rocks and seaweed and shells uncovered by the receding August tide. He looked back for her before slipping down to the road's level. On the sloping beach he could see, between the glitter of a hundred little sunlit pools, a faded blue woollen beret, that was like a teasel, marking the spot where Vinca determinedly hunted for shrimps and hermit-crabs.

“Oh, wel, if it amuses her!” thought Philip.

He lowered himself into one of the tracks, and felt the delicious contact of the clean sand against his bare skin. With his ear to the fishing-baskets, he could hear the twittering sound of a handful of shrimps, and the persistent scraping of a large crab's claws against the lid.

Phil sighed, sunk in a general sense of well-being in which his pleasant

tiredness, the quivering of his muscles exercised by the climb, and the colour and warmth of a salt-laden Breton afternoon, each played a part. He sat down, his eyes dazzled by the milky sky at which he had been staring, and contemplated with surprise the fresh coating of sunburn on his arms and legs—the arms and legs of a sixteen-year-old boy, slender but shapely, the muscles not yet visible, arms and legs which might equally well have been the pride of some young girl. He had grazed his ankle ; he wiped off the blood with his hand, and, licking his fingers, tasted the mingled saltiness of blood and seawater.

The land-breeze was redolent of gathered harvests, farmyard odours, and the fragrance of crushed mint ; a dull streak of red, almost on a level with the waves, began to overspread the sky, which had been flawlessly blue since morning. Philip had no words to say :

“ I shall always remember this moment. There are so few moments in life when one’s physical state is so nearly perfect, one’s eyes so filled with delight, and one’s mind so carefree, so nearly empty of thought that every fibre of one’s being is completely satisfied.” He could not voice his thoughts, but nevertheless the tinkle of a cracked bell round the neck of a bleating goat set his mouth quivering with the same emotion that moved him to tears. He did not look towards the rocks where Vinca was wandering, nor in his exaltation did he utter her name ; in the depths of undreamed-of joy in which he was drowning, youth forbade him to cry for help to youth, submerged, perhaps in equal ecstasy. . . .

“ Hullo, there, youngster ! ”

The voice which recalled him was young and authoritative. Without getting up, Philip turned round, and, a yard away from him, saw a woman in

white, digging her high white heels and the point of her stick into the roadway.

"I suppose I can't drive my car any farther this way, can I, little boy?"

Politeness made Philip rise and go up to her, but, once on his feet, he reddened beneath her gaze as the freshening air struck his bare chest.

She smiled, and corrected herself.

"Do forgive me, monsieur. . . . My chauffeur must have taken the wrong turning. He wouldn't listen to me. . . . This road just becomes a footpath that leads to the sea, doesn't it?"

"Yes, madame. It's just the track for the sea-wrack."

"Sea-wrack? And where or what is sea-wrack?"

Phil could not help laughing, and the white lady echoed him obligingly.

"I suppose I've said something funny. I shall be calling you 'little boy' again if you're not serious. You look about twelve years old when you laugh."

In spite of her words, however, she looked at him as though he were a man.

“Don’t you know what sea-wrack is?” said Phil. “It’s—well, it’s sea-wrack!”

“Thanks so much for your lucid description!” said the white lady.

The imperious and condescending voice had the same effect on Philip as her steady look, and he felt suddenly limp; the usual sex-consciousness of his age left him inert and helpless in the presence of a woman.

“Did you have a good catch?” she asked.

“No, madame, not very good. . . . I mean . . . Vinca caught more shrimps than I did. . . .”

“Who’s Vinca? Is she your sister?”

“No, madame, she’s a friend of mine.”

“Vinca—is that a foreign name?”

“No . . . not exactly . . . well, it’s short for Periwinkle.”

“Is she the same age as you?”

“She’s fifteen and I’m sixteen.”

She made no comment, but a second later she remarked :

“You’ve got some sand on your cheek.”

He rubbed his face so hard that he nearly scraped away the skin, then let his arm drop to his side.

“I haven’t any feeling in my arm,” he thought. “I believe I must be going to faint, or something. . . .”

The lady in white released Philip from her gaze, and said, smiling :

“There’s your friend,” and she pointed to the corner of the road round which Vinca had appeared, carrying the wound-up fishing-tackle and Philip’s blazer. “Good-bye, monsieur——?”

“Phil,” he supplied mechanically.

Instead of holding out her hand to him, she nodded two or three times, as though she were nodding assent to some secret thought. She was still

in sight when Vinca came running up.

“ Phil ! Whoever’s that ? ”

He shrugged his shoulders with a blank look.

“ You don’t know her ? Then why were you speaking to her ? ”

For answer, Phil gave her a scathing glance full of his re-awakened desire to annoy her, and shook off his temporary yoke. He was pleasantly aware of their respective ages, of their friendship which was developing into something else ; he was pleasantly aware of his superiority and of Vinca’s rather grudging devotion. She was dripping wet, and her bare knees where her skirt ended were scarred and scratched ; her hands would have done credit to a gardener’s lad or a cabin-boy ; she had a faded green scarf knotted round her neck, and her sweater smelt of live mussels. Her tousled old beret no longer vied with her eyes, and, except for those anxious,

jealous, speaking eyes of hers, she might have been a student dressed up for a rag. Phil began to laugh, and Vinca stamped her foot as she threw his blazer at him.

“Will you answer me or not?” she demanded.

With a careless air, he thrust his hands through his sleeveless armholes.

“Don’t be so stupid,” he said. “If you want to know, it was only someone whose car had taken the wrong turning. It would have got stuck here in another minute. I told her which way to turn.”

“Oh . . .”

Vinca had seated herself, and was pouring a stream of wet sand from her beach-shoes.

“But why did she disappear in such a hurry just as I was coming?”

Phil took his time before answering. He was secretly enjoying the subtle offer of intimacy, the veiled look and the enigmatic smile of the stranger. But

suddenly he remembered the familiar and somehow derogatory way in which she had said " Vinca " and he frowned, up in arms for his playmate, ignorant though she was of the implied slur. For a moment he remained lost in thought, and finally hit on an ambiguous answer to her question which satisfied both his hidden desire for romance and his middle-class self-consciousness.

" The best thing she could possibly have done was to disappear," he said.

v

V

He tried entreaty.

“ Vinca ! Look at me. Give me your hand . . . let’s talk about something else.”

She turned away towards the window and took her hand gently from his.

“ Let me alone. I’m miserable.”

All that could be seen through the panes was the autumn high tide, bringing the rain in its wake. The world came to an end on the brink of the sand. One more gust of wind, one more upheaval of that grey ocean-meadow furrowed

with ridges of foam, and the house must surely float away like an ark. . . . But Phil and Vinca were used to the August high tide, with its monotonous booming, and to the September tide, with its curled white crests that were like sea-horses. They knew that this particular corner of the beach was unapproachable, and each year, ever since they had been children, they had defied the foaming breakers which dashed powerlessly against the fretted shores of man's realm.

Phil re-opened the glass door, and closed it with a struggle. He battled with the wind, and the fine, salt-tasting rain, that the storm winnowed through the air like smoke, stung his forehead. He picked up the steel-studded bowls, the boxwood jack, the racquets and balls, these playthings that now bored him, and put them away in the outhouse as carefully as though they were a series of disguises of which he would

still need to avail himself. Behind the window, Vinca's gaze followed his movements, and the trickling raindrops on the pane looked as though they were tears welling from her troubled eyes, those eyes of hers that still shone clearly blue in spite of the grey overcast sky and the leaden green sea.

Phil folded the deck-chairs and tipped up the bamboo table. He refrained from smiling at Vinca. The time had long passed for need to give each other pleasure with smiles, and to-day happiness was far from them.

"Only three weeks and a few days before the holidays are over," thought Phil, as he wiped the sand from his hands on a tuft of wild thyme in whose bells rain-soaked bees were torpidly awaiting the coming sun. He breathed the fresh fragrance of the thyme on his hands, and fought against a wave of weakness and inertia that swept over

him, the forlornness that a ten-year-old child might have felt. But between the swaying convolvulus flowers round the window, between the glistening rain-drops on the pane, he looked at Vinca's face, seeing her, not as a child, but as a woman, and knowing that for him alone was that aspect of her which she hid from the others behind the docile and laughing mask of her fifteen years.

The rain ceased, and a rift opened in the clouds over the horizon like a luminous gash from which vertical rays of a mournful pallor spread out like a fan. At this lull in the storm, Philip's heart leapt up in quest of happiness, in quest of that relaxation to which his sixteen unhappy years ingenuously laid claim. But, though he stared out to sea, he was still conscious of the closed window and of Vinca's face pressed against the glass.

"Only a little longer, and we shan't

be together. What shall I do?" he thought.

He had forgotten that when the holidays had ended last year he had been miserable until, on his return to Paris, his school and his classes had brought a measure of resignation. Last year Phil was fifteen; as each year goes by, all that does not concern Vinca and himself is relegated to a dim and melancholy past.

"Do I really like her as much as all that?" he wondered, and finding, in reply to his question, only the word "love," he angrily brushed his hair out of his eyes. "I don't suppose I do like her as much as that. But she belongs to me, and that's what it is."

He turned back towards the house, and shouted against the wind:

"Come out, Vinca; it's stopped raining."

She opened the door, and hesitated on the threshold as though she were ill,

hunching up one shoulder with a fearful air.

“Aren’t you coming? The tide’s going out, and it’s sure to rain again.”

She knotted a white scarf at the back of her head, so that it looked like a bandage.

“Come as far as the point, can’t you? It will be quite dry under the cliff.”

She followed him silently along the path cut around the cliff towards the Custom House, crushing marjoram, that smelt of pepper, and the last flowers of honeywort underfoot. Below, the sea made a sound like a banner flapping in the wind, and sucked greedily around the rocks. Warm gusts of air came up to them, redolent of live mussels and the earthy smell of the tiny ledges where the breeze and the birds had scattered sprouting seeds.

Presently they reached their retreat,

dry and sheltered beneath an overhanging rock, an unprotected eyrie whence they seemed to float towards the sea. Philip sat down beside Vinca, and she leaned her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes as she did so and looking utterly weary. Her rounded, sunburnt cheeks, powdered with freckles and covered with a faint down, like the bloom on a peach, had lost their colour since morning, and her rosy mouth, slightly bitten like a fruit caught by the sun, was pale.

Earlier in the day, instead of rallying herself against the reproaches of her "childhood's sweetheart" with her ordinary middle-class commonsense, she had dissolved into tears, uttered despairing protestations, and had hurled bitter indictments against their youth, the future hopelessly out of reach, the impossibility of escape, and unwelcome resignation. She had sobbed out: "I love you," as though she were saying

“ Good-bye ” and “ I can’t ever leave you any more.” Love which had outstripped them in its growth, had enchanted their childhood and kept them, in their adolescence, from other so-called friendships. More sophisticated than Daphnis, Philip treated Vinca with the off-handedness and sexless affection of a brother for a sister, but inwardly he cared for her as though they had been wedded to one another in their cradles, according to Oriental custom. . . .

Vinca sighed, and opened her eyes without lifting her head.

“ I’m not tiring you, am I, Phil ? ”

He shook his head, looking into the eyes so close to his own, those blue eyes of hers blinking between long gold-tipped lashes, that grew daily dearer to him.

“ Look,” he said ; “ the storm’s passing over. It will be high tide again at four o’clock in the morning. But it’s

clearing up for us, and it will be bright moonlight to-night. . . .”

Instinctively he spoke of calm and peace, steering Vinca's thoughts to a quiet haven. But she did not answer him.

“Are you coming to play tennis with the Jallons to-morrow?” he asked.

Closing her eyes again, she shook her head violently, as though she were refusing ever to eat, drink, or go on living any more.

“Vinca!” insisted Philip sternly. “You must go. *We are* going.”

She parted her lips and stared at the sea as though she were under sentence of death.

“All right, we *are* going,” she repeated. “What's the good of not going? What's the good of going? Nothing makes the slightest difference.”

Both of them thought of the Jallons' garden, of tea and tennis. They were thinking, innocent and passionate lovers

that they were, of the game they would play to-morrow in the guise of laughing children, and both felt overcome with weariness at the thought.

“Only a little longer, and we shan’t be together,” Philip thought again. “We shall wake up in different houses, and I shall only see Vinca on Sundays at her people’s place or at mine, or at the pictures. And I’m sixteen—sixteen years, five months, and twenty-one days. There’ll be hundreds and hundreds of days to bear. . . . Of course, we shall have a few months’ holiday together, but the end’s so ghastly. . . . And yet she’s mine . . . she’s mine. . . .”

He suddenly noticed that Vinca had slipped away from his shoulder. With a quiet, gradual, yet deliberate movement, she was sliding with closed eyes over the narrow ledge of the rock—already her feet were dangling over space. He realised her intention, kept

quite cool, and at the critical moment tightened his arms about her so that she could not free herself. Holding her closely against him, he was conscious of the living reality, the vital perfection of the body of this child who was ready to obey his wishes so long as they both drew breath, and who was equally prepared to drag him down with her to death.

“Why should I die? What’s the use of it? Not yet,” thought Philip. “I don’t want to die before she’s mine. She was born for me; she’s got to be mine.”

Sitting on the sloping rock, he dreamed of possession in the shy way in which a boy might dream of it, but also with all his virility, an inheritor grimly resolved to enjoy all those delights which are appointed to him by time and the laws of life. For the first time the fate of their love lay in his hands; should he give her up to the sea, or

should he hold her rooted to the rock like the obstinate seeds that flourished there with so little encouragement ?

With both arms forming a girdle about her, he lifted up her body, grown heavy, and woke her with a brief :

“ Come on, Vinca.”

She stared at him standing above her, and, seeing him determined and impatient to go, she realised that the time for dying was past. With a kind of unwilling ecstasy she looked again at the reflected sunset in Philip's dark eyes, at his ruffled hair, his mouth, and the winged shadow of down over his upper lip, and cried :

“ You don't love me enough, Phil ; you don't love me enough.”

He wanted to answer, but stopped himself, knowing he had no heroic assurances to give her. He turned scarlet and hung his head, for while she had been slipping towards that bourne where young love can no longer torment

its victims, he had been thinking of her as treasure-trove, sealed to himself, whose secret was the only thing that mattered ; and, so thinking, had refused to relinquish her to death.

VI

VI

For some days the scent of autumn had drifted down in the morning air to the sea. From daybreak to that hour when the sun-warmed earth, fanned by the sea-breeze, gave out a fragrance of ploughed furrows, threshed corn, and rich pasture-lands, these August mornings breathed of autumn. Late dew sparkled on the grass beneath the hedges, and when at midday Vinca picked up an aspen-leaf that had turned brown and fallen too soon, the other side of the leaf, still green, was wet and

diamonded with dew. Clammy mushrooms sprang up out of the earth, and, now that the nights were cooler, the garden spiders disappeared into the outhouse where the toys were kept, and skilfully spun their webs across the ceiling.

During the middle hours of the day, however, that escaped the meshes of the autumn mists and the gossamer threads that stretched across the brambles laden with blackberries, the clock of time seemed to be put back towards July. High in the sky the sun drained up the dew, rotted the newly-sprung mushrooms, and brought a cloud of wasps swarming about the withered vine where a few meagre grapes clustered. Vinca and Lisette simultaneously threw off the thin woollen cardigans which they had worn over their white frocks since breakfast to keep themselves warm:

There followed a succession of still, windless days, cloudless but for those

trailing milky drifts which floated into the sky towards noon, only to vanish ; days so divinely similar that Phil and Vinca, wrapped in peace, could almost believe that the year had stopped at its sweetest moment, held deliciously captive by an everlasting August.

In their state of physical happiness they seldom gave a thought to September that would soon part them, and they cast aside the morbid moods that overtook them, young as they were, brought on by untimely love, necessarily secret and silent, and by the recurrent bitterness of their periodical separations.

Some of the friends who had joined them at tennis and fishing had already left for Touraine, and most of the neighbouring villas were closed. Phil and Vinca were left more or less to themselves on the beach, and in the big house whose varnished hall smelt like a ship's planks. They enjoyed to the full the

sweets of solitude amongst relations who flitted vaguely in and out at all hours. Vinca, obsessed as she was by Philip, carried out her small tasks ; she gathered sprays of clematis and trails of laurustinus out of the garden to fill the vases ; picked the early pears and the late black currants for dessert ; poured out the coffee, and offered a light to Phil's father and her own ; made little frocks for Lisette, and lived a queer kind of existence among the ghostly throng of relatives whose faces seemed an indefinite blur to her, and whose voices she scarcely distinguished. This pleasant semi-blindness and semi-deafness was like the beginning of a trance. Only Lisette, her little sister, managed to retain some individuality, and shone out brilliantly and distinctly. For that matter, she was as like Vinca as a small mushroom to a larger one.

“ If I die, Lisette can take my place,” said Vinca to Phil.

But, instead of laughing, Phil shrugged his shoulders, for lovers of his age refuse to admit the possibilities of change or illness or unfaithfulness ; death has no part in their plans unless it is bestowed as a reward, or looked upon as the outcome of a set of circumstances to which there can be no other issue.

On one of the loveliest of these August mornings, Phil and Vinca decided to desert the family party and go for a picnic with Lisette, taking their food and their bathing-things with them. In former holidays they had often gone on these expeditions to the caves in the cliffs ; latterly, however, their pleasure had been spoilt by their state of doubt and unrest. But to-day, the radiant morning restored their lost youth to the two children who had strayed so far from the garden of childhood toward which they sometimes looked back so longingly.

Phil went ahead, carrying the nets for the afternoon's fishing, and the string bag containing the clinking bottles of foaming cider and mineral-water. Lisette came next in bathing-dress and sand-shoes, swinging a knotted cloth that held fresh-baked bread, and Vinca, wearing a blue sweater and white shorts, and laden with baskets like an African donkey, closed the procession. At each awkward corner, Phil, without turning round, called :

“Wait a sec. I'll take one of the baskets.”

“It's quite all right,” called back Vinca, and, loaded as she was, she managed to guide Lisette through the bracken, which was so high that the small head with its stiff thatch of yellow hair was almost hidden from sight.

Presently they hit on a creek which was no more than a cleft between two rocks where the tide had left a layer of fine sand, and which widened in the

shape of a horn of plenty down to the sea.

“Sure you don’t want any help?” suggested Philip.

Vinca refused to answer, and, looking at him, she laughed soundlessly. The unusual blue of her eyes, her cheeks darkened by the warm peach-like bloom, the double row of her teeth, all seemed to flash for a moment with such an irradiation of light that Philip felt a sudden pang. But she turned away, and he watched her as she went blithely to and fro, stooping down with the free, untrammelled movements of a boy.

“Food’s all you’ve come for,” cried Vinca. “Oh, you men!”

The “man” in question appreciated her sally, with its implied flattery. As soon as the feast was spread, he sternly summoned Lisette, ate the sandwiches which Vinca had buttered, dipped his cubes of Gruyère cheese and his portion of lettuce into the salt, and licked the

juice which oozed out of the over-ripe pears from his fingers. Vinca presided, looking like a young cup-bearer, her forehead bound with a band of blue ribbon. She boned sardines for Lisette, poured out the drinks, peeled the fruit, and then set herself to eat with her firm white teeth. A few yards away, the tide, which was going out, made a whispering sound ; away inland, a threshing-machine hummed monotonously, and a trickle of fresh water ran from the rock, with its tufts of grass and small yellow flowers.

Philip stretched himself, one arm folded beneath his head.

“ Isn’t everything lovely ? ” he murmured.

Vinca, who was standing busily wiping knives and glasses, let her blue gaze fall on him. He did not stir, hiding the pleasure which he felt in her admiration of him. In that moment, he knew that he was beautiful, with his flushed cheeks,

his scarlet mouth, and the ruffled hair shadowing his forehead.

Vinca continued her tasks in silence and Philip closed his eyes, soothed by the ebbing tide, a distant noonday chime, and Lisette's low humming. Light sleep swiftly overtook him, a siesta-sleep through which sounds were audible, only to become part of his dream. Lying on the yellow sand after his picnic lunch, he became an elemental and ancient Phil, stripped of everything, yet primitively burdened because he owned a woman. . . .

A more piercing cry than the rest made him open his eyes ; near the sea, whose colours had been drained by the vertical rays of the midday sun, he saw Vinca bending over Lisette, bandaging a grazed limb and pulling a thorn from her little sister's confidingly out-held hand. . . . The picture they made did not disturb the trend of Phil's thoughts, and he closed his eyes once more. . . .

“A baby . . . that’s right . . . we’ve got a baby. . . .”

His dream continued : Love, outstripping time, overstepped the wide limit of its own boundaries, and took him back to the very beginnings of life, to a solitary world of which he was master. He passed a cave, glimpsed a naked form beneath the open meshes of a net, and saw the red glimmer of a fire whose flames flickered on the earth’s level. . . . Then the picture faded, the wings of vision failed him, and, like a plummet, he sounded the darkest depths of sleep.

VII

VII

“ I can’t believe that the days are getting shorter already.”

“ Why can’t you believe it ? You always say you don’t believe it every year at exactly the same time. I’m afraid you can’t alter the solstice, Marthe.”

“ Who mentioned the solstice ? I don’t expect anything of the solstice, and let’s hope that the solstice will return the compliment.”

“ Woman’s failure to grasp certain facts is really extraordinary. I’ve explained the changes in the tides to this

particular woman at least twenty times, but her mind's still as blank as a wall ! ”

“ You may be my brother-in-law, Auguste, but I don't see why I should pay more attention to you than to anyone else. . . . ”

“ Oh, Lord. . . . It's no wonder to me that you aren't married. Pass me the ash-tray, old lady, will you ? ”

“ If I pass it to you, where do you think Monsieur Audebert's going to put his ashes ? ”

“ Don't worry about me, Madame Ferret—I can use one of these shells ; the children seem to have scattered them on all the tables.”

“ That's your fault, Audebert. Ever since you told them that the shells would make artistic ash-trays, their wanderings on the rocks have become quite a mission. Isn't that so, Phil ? ”

“ Yes, Monsieur Ferret.”

“ Your daughter gave up her first attempt at money-making on the same

account, Ferret. Do you know what Vinca had planned? She was going to offer to provide Camonieux, the bird-fancier and seed-merchant, with the cuttle-fish bones on which canaries sharpen their beaks. Am I telling the truth or not, Vinca?"

"Yes. Monsieur Audebert."

"She's more business-like than you'd think, the little rogue. Sometimes I regret that——"

"Oh, Auguste, are you going to start on that again?"

"I shall if I think fit. You agree that you want to keep the child at home, don't you? What scope do you give her for her mental and physical development?"

"She has exactly the same scope as myself. You don't see me sitting around twiddling my thumbs, do you? I intend her to marry. That's all I'm aiming at."

My sister's old-fashioned."

“Husbands never object to that.”

“I agree with you, Madame Ferret. A girl’s future . . . I know there’s no hurry. Vinca’s only fifteen ; she’s got plenty of time to think about a vocation. Are you listening, Vinca ? Accused, what have you to say in your defence ? ”

“Nothing, Monsieur Audebert.”

“ ‘ Nothing, Monsieur Audebert ’ ! You don’t worry your head, do you ? Our children don’t take much notice of us, do they, Ferret ? And how cool they are this evening ! ”

“They’ve been leading such a mad-cap life. Vinca’s completely worn out the seat of her fishing-shorts, if you know what I mean.”

“Marthe ! ”

“Why, ‘ Marthe ’ ? Can’t I mention shorts ? We’re not a lot of fussy English people ! ”

“But you forget there’s a young man present ! ”

“A young man indeed ! Phil, I

suppose you mean. What are you drawing, Phil ? ”

“ I’m trying to design a turbine, Monsieur Ferret.”

“ My salaams to the coming engineer. . . . Did you notice the moon shining over the Grouin, Audebert ? I’ve seen that same old August moon rise over the sea for fifteen years, and I still love it. Fancy, fifteen years ago the Grouin was a desert, but the wind has sown all the tiny trees, and . . . ”

“ You needn’t go over all that as though I were a summer visitor, Ferret ! Fifteen years ago I was looking for a spot on this coast where I could run through the first lot of money I’d ever managed to save up. . . . ”

“ Was that really fifteen years ago ? Yes, you’re right, Philip was only just beginning to toddle. . . . Come and look at the moon, old lady—in all these fifteen years did you ever see it such a colour ? It’s green—absolutely green ! ”

Philip looked speculatively at Vinca. Their people had been speaking about a period when, though no one could see her, the vital spark had already been kindled. He had no clear recollection of the time when they had first stumbled together over the yellow sands ; the sun-burnt little figure in its white muslin frock had vanished from his mind. But when deep in his heart he murmured " Vinca," the name called up for him, together with herself, memories of sand warm against bare knees, little heaps of sand trickling between his fingers. . . .

Her blue eyes met his and, as inscrutable as his own, looked away again.

" Vinca, aren't you going to bed ? "

" Not just yet, mother, if you don't mind. I'm putting the binding on Lisette's waders."

She spoke softly, then withdrew into a world of her own, a world where only Philip was admitted, a world that lay outside the circle of familiar household

Shades, who hardly seemed to be there.

Phil, having drawn a turbine, an aeroplane-propeller, and the mechanism of a separator, decorated the wings of his propeller with those large shadowy eyes that appear on peacock's feathers. Then he traced a capital V, and proceeded to alter it until with the help of a blue pencil it looked like a blue eye fringed with long lashes.

"Look, Vinca."

She leaned over him, put one of her mahogany-brown hands on his paper, and said, with a smile :

"How silly you are !"

"What's he done now ?" cried Monsieur Audebert.

The two young people turned on the speaker with a rather haughty air of surprise.

"I haven't done anything, father," said Philip. "I'm only being idiotic. I've put feet on my turbine so that it can go faster."

“ If ever you learn common sense, I’ll chalk it up ! You’re not sixteen ; you’re six ! ”

Vinca and Phil smiled politely, and again dismissed from their minds those misty beings who were playing cards or sewing in the same room with themselves. Vaguely, like voices heard above the ripple of water, they caught jesting allusions to Philip’s “ career ” (engineering and electrostatics) ; to Vinca’s marriage, that much-referred-to subject. Laughter echoed round the table when somebody suggested marrying her to Phil. . . .

“ It would be exactly like brother and sister marrying—they know each other much too well ! ”

“ Love, my dear Madame Ferret, springs unforeseen, comes with the suddenness of a thunderclap ! ”

“ ‘ L’amour est enfant de Bohème ’ !
... ”

“ Don’t sing, Marthe ! We’re enjoying

the fine weather and the north-west wind ! ”

. . . Vinca and he engaged ? Philip smiled with pitying condescension. Why should they be engaged ? What good would it do ? Vinca belonged to him, and he belonged to Vinca. They had often wisely foreseen how the yet far-distant engagement would disturb their long-existent love. They anticipated the daily jokes and laughter at their expense . . . they glimpsed their own misgivings . . . then, with a common impulse, they turned away from the peephole through which they gazed at the world of reality from the fastness of their hidden lives. Their parents' childishness, their easily-roused laughter, their belief in a happy future, filled them with envy.

“ How light-hearted they are,” Philip thought, and he searched his father's face for some glimmer of light, some trace of an ancient scar. “ He's never

been in love, poor man," he decided superbly.

Vinca was trying to imagine a time when her mother was young and suffered perhaps from unavowed love. She saw her as she was now, her hair prematurely white, wearing gold-rimmed pince-nez, and with those slim lines that made her so elegant. . . .

Vinca blushed, decided that she alone was capable of feeling the physical and mental pangs of love, and stopped bothering her head about the idle Shades. Her thoughts hurried on to meet Philip in that undiscoverable retreat where sometimes both thought they must die beneath the weight of the too-precious and overwhelming burden they had shouldered before their strength was ripe.

VIII

When he reached the corner, Philip jumped from his bicycle, flung it on one side of the road, and threw himself down opposite on the chalky grass of the bank.

“ That’s enough of that ! I’m fagged out. Why on earth did I suggest taking that telegram ? ”

The eleven miles from the villa to St. Malo had been bearable. The sea-breeze had been behind him during the long run down the two hills, and the air had struck pleasantly cool to his bare chest.

But on the way back, Philip stormed at having to pedal in the heat, and wished he had not been so good-natured. He kicked up his heels in the yellowish grass, and his lips tasted of dust from the flinty roadway. He rolled over on his back, and spread-eagled his arms. Exhaustion had drawn dark circles round his eyes, making him look as though he had just been through a boxing-bout, and the scars, grazes, and bruises on his sunburnt legs beneath his shorts spoke eloquently of holidays and fishing expeditions over the rocks.

“I ought to have brought Vinca with me,” he grumbled. “What a life !”

But another self within him, the self who adored Vinca, the self that was held captive in the toils of premature love like a young prince in an echoing palace, said : “You know perfectly well that if she’d felt tired, you’d have carried her all the way home. . . .”

"I wouldn't have done anything of the kind," said the first Phil, and this time his other self dared not argue. . . .

He lay at the foot of a wall above which he could see aspen-trees and pines. Ever since he had learnt to walk or ride a bicycle, Philip had known this part of the coast by heart. "This must be Ker-Anna," he thought. "I can hear their electric-light plant going. I wonder who's taken the house this summer." The dynamo behind the wall made a noise like a dog panting, and the silver aspen-leaves trembled in the wind like ripples on a brook. At peace with the world, Philip closed his eyes.

"I think you've earned a glass of orangeade, Monsieur Phil," said a quiet voice.

Opening his eyes, and looking up, Phil saw, as though it were a reflection in a pool, a woman's face bent over

him. This face, seen upside-down, had a slightly thickened outline, a mouth touched up with lipstick, the lower half of a nose with narrow, bad-tempered nostrils, and two shadowy eyes which, viewed from this angle, appeared almost oblique. The amber-tinted face was smiling with a familiar and yet not friendly expression. Philip recognised the lady in white whose car had taken the wrong turning on the sea-wrack road, the lady who had first addressed him as : "Hullo, there, youngster," only to alter it to : "Monsieur. . . ." He sprang up and greeted her with all the politeness he could muster. She leaned on her crossed arms, left bare by her white frock, and scanned him from head to foot as she had done before.

"Do tell me, monsieur," she said seriously. "Do you wear such 'scanty clothing because you're under a vow, or because you prefer it ?"

Philip's cooled-down blood rushed back in a burning tide to his cheeks and ears.

"I'm only dressed like this because I had to take a wire from my father to one of his clients," he cried defensively. "There was no one else to go—it's much too hot for either Vinca or Lisette."

"Don't be so tragic about it," said the lady in white. "I'm terribly emotional—I might dissolve into tears at any minute."

Philip was hurt by her words and the inscrutable look behind which lay a secret smile. He snatched up his bicycle by the handle-bars, much as though it were a child he was pulling up by its arm, and started to mount it.

"Do have a glass of orangeade before you go, Monsieur Phil," she invited. He heard the grating of a gate in the wall, and his attempt to ride away ended in his stopping in front of an open door, an

avenue of pink, hectic-looking hydrangeas, and the lady in white.

"My name's Madame Dalleray," she said.

"Mine's Philip Audebert," stammered Phil hurriedly.

She made a gesture of indifference, murmured an "Oh" that plainly betokened her lack of interest, and walked close beside him, without flinching at the heat of the sun on her burnished black hair. Phil's head began to ache; he felt the same apprehension of fainting as he had experienced the last time he had met her, and thought it must be a slight sun-stroke that was depriving him of his volition and self-command.

"Totote! Bring the orangeade!" called Madame Dalleray.

Phil started and came to himself. "I can see the wall," he said inwardly. "It isn't high. I'll jump it, and . . ." But he refrained from adding: "And . . . I shall be safe," and, as he crossed a

velvety lawn in the wake of the white frock, he summoned up all the courage of his sixteen years. "After all, she can't eat me," he thought. "And if she's so keen on getting rid of her orange-ade . . ."

He followed her into the house, and nearly lost his footing as he found himself in a shadowy room, the blinds drawn down against the sun and the flies. The cool of the shuttered and curtained *salon* made him catch his breath. He stumbled against something soft, and fell on a cushion, almost bursting into tears of shame when he heard an ironical little laugh echoing out of space. An icy glass touched his hand.

"Drink it slowly," said Madame Dalleray's voice. "It was stupid of you to ice it, Totote ; it was quite cold enough in the cellar."

She dipped three white fingers into the glass, and as rapidly withdrew them. The glitter of a diamond shone

reflected through the cube of ice that the three fingers held. Philip took two small sips with his eyes closed, but he could hardly detect the acid flavour of the drink ; when he raised his lids, he made out the red and white of the tapestry and the dull gold and black of the curtains. A woman whom he had not noticed made her exit carrying a clinking tray. On a perch he saw a red and blue macaw spreading its wings with a fan-like motion that showed its ruffled flesh-coloured underfeathers.

“ He’s lovely,” said ‘Phil in a hoarse voice.

“ All the more lovely because he can’t speak,” said Madame Dalleray.

She had seated herself at some distance from Philip, and a straight streamer of smoke that had the mingled scents of resin and geranium rose from an incense-burner between them. Philip crossed one bare leg over the other, and, to add to the *Arabian Nights* atmosphere,

the lady in white smiled with such ambiguous seduction that Philip was thrown into complete confusion.

"Your people come every year to this part of the coast, don't they?" said the soft yet decisive voice of Madame Dalleray after a pause.

"Yes," he stammered out, quite overcome.

"It's a delightful country, though I've only just made its acquaintance. It's a toned down, not very characteristic version of Brittany, but delightfully restful, and you never see such colours in the sea anywhere else."

Philip made no answer. He was concentrating the remainder of his failing strength, and was quite prepared to hear a muffled, regular patter as the blood that was receding from his heart dripped on to the carpet.

"You love it, don't you?"

"Love who?" he said with a start.

"The Cancale coast?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Are you feeling ill, Monsieur Phil? You're not? That's good, although, as a matter of fact, I'm an excellent nurse. . . . But I thoroughly agree with you : it's much too much effort to talk in this heat, so don't let's talk."

"I never said I didn't want to talk. . . ."

She had not made a single gesture, nor ventured a word that was not completely commonplace since they had come into the darkened room. Nevertheless, every intonation of her voice had an inexplicably mesmeric effect on Phil, and he rejected with terror the suggestion of a mutual silence. His attempt at escape was pitiful and desperate. He put his glass down clumsily on a spectral table, muttered a sentence without knowing what he said, got to his feet, and reached the door, warding off shadowy furniture and overcoming invisible stumbling-blocks until he

reached the garden where he breathed in the air as though he were suffocating.

“ Ah . . . ” he said below his breath. And, with a gesture of unconscious pathos, he pressed his hand against that spot where we believe the heart beats.

Then he suddenly returned to life, laughed meaninglessly, and, brusquely shaking Madame Dalleray’s hand, sprang on to his bicycle and rode off. On the top of the last hill, Vinca was waiting anxiously.

“ What on earth have you been doing all this time, Phil ? ”

He lightly kissed her lids, through which her eyes were reflected faintly blue, and said garrulously :

“ What have I been doing ? Oh, lots and lots. I’ve been ambushed and attacked and shut in a cave and drugged and tied naked to a stake and flogged and stretched on the rack . . . ”

Vinca leaned laughing against his shoulder while Philip shook his head to

rid his lashes of two tears of weakness that clung there, and thought :

“I wonder what she'd say if she guessed that I've just told her the truth. . . .”

IX

Ever since Madame Dalleray had handed him the glass of orangeade, Philip had tasted its stinging coldness on his lips and at the back of his throat. He was sure that never before had he tasted, never again would he taste, a draught so bitter.

“And yet,” he told himself, “I never even noticed it when I sipped it—it wasn’t till afterwards, till ages afterwards, that . . .” The secret visit of which Vinca knew nothing burned in his memory like a festering wound,

flaming up or dying down according to his mood.

His life was still Vinca's, it still belonged to his darling little comrade, so near his own age, born just a year later than he, as close to him as a twin sister to her twin brother, as concerned about him as a lover who knows her beloved will leave her on the morrow. But dreams and chimeras exist independent of real life ; a nightmare of sensuous darkness, and dull red and black and gold hangings, had overshadowed Phil's sense of reality, eclipsing the normal hours of the day, ever since that hot afternoon when the lady in white had poured out the orangeade for him in the drawing-room at Ker-Anna. He saw again the gleaming diamond on the rim of the glass . . . the cube of ice glittering between the three white fingers that held it . . . the red and blue macaw, silent on its perch, showing flesh-coloured underfeathers beneath its

wing. . . . When he evoked these images, he wondered whether he had over-coloured them, whether they were not figments of a dream that had the power of transmuting green leaves to blue, and could change shades into certainties. . . .

No happiness had come of his visit. Once, when he remembered the scent that rose from the incense, he could not swallow his food, and babbled inconsequently :

“ Don’t you think the shrimps smell of balsam to-day, Vinca ? ”

Had there been happiness in his entrance into the darkened room, in his stumblings against the velvety-soft encumbrances ? Had there been happiness in his clumsy escape, in the hot sun that had fallen suddenly on his back like a cloak ? No, oh, no, there was no semblance of happiness to be found in these things ; they filled him rather with discomfort, with the anxiety of a loan that must be repaid. . . .

"I owe her some courtesy," said Phil to himself one morning. "After all, I don't see why I should let her think me a complete ass. I'll leave some flowers for her, and after that I can forget her. But what flowers can I take?"

The dog-daisies and velvety snapdragons that grew in the kitchen-garden were quite unworthy. Late August had withered the wild honeysuckle and the Dorothy Perkins roses that twined up the aspen-trees. But a hollow in the sand-hills carpeted with blue, slim, mauve-stemmed teasels was aptly called "Vinca's eyes."

"Teasels . . . I noticed some in a copper jug at Madame Dalleray's. . . . Could I possibly take her teasels? I'll hang them on the gate. I won't go in . . ."

With sixteen-year-old guile, he waited until a day when Vinca, her blue eyes black-circled, feeling a little languid, a little out of sorts and on edge, lay down

in the shade, refusing to go for a walk or bathe. He secretly gathered the finest teasels and tied them up, lacerating his hands excruciatingly on their spiny leaves, and set off on his bicycle through the fine Breton day which lightly veiled the earth in a mist that melted milky-white into the sea. He rode along, rather hampered by his white ducks and his best pullover, until he reached the walls of Ker-Anna. Here he dismounted and walked, bent double so as to be out of sight, towards the gate, where he meant to throw his bunch of flowers over the wall, much as though they were stolen goods with which he might presently be discovered. He studied his aim, marked the spot where the wall practically touched the villa, swung his arm in a circle, and the bouquet whirled in the air. Philip heard a cry, the sound of steps on the gravel path, and a voice which he recognised, though it was blurred with anger, exclaiming :

“I’d like to get hold of the idiot who did that. . . .”

Philip felt so insulted that he gave up the thought of flight, and the anger-filled lady in white saw him standing at the gate. Her expression changed as she confronted him. She smoothed her forehead, and shrugged her shoulders :

“I might have known it was you,” she said. “That wasn’t very bright of you, was it ? ”

She waited for an excuse that was not forthcoming, for Phil, taken up with staring at her, vaguely appreciated in himself the fact that she was again wearing white, that her mouth was discreetly reddened, and that she had pencilled dark circles beneath her eyes. She held one hand against her cheek.

“Look, I’m bleeding.”

“I’m bleeding too,” said Philip stiffly.

And he held out his torn hands. She

leaned over and pressed out a tiny drop of blood on his palm.

"Did you pick them for me?" she asked carelessly.

He nodded briefly, enjoying the idea of treating this charming and well-bred woman with such off-handedness. But she manifested neither annoyance nor surprise.

"Are you coming in for a minute?"

He shook his head as casually as before, and the action ruffled his hair around his face, which was empty of all emotion but a strange and secret sternness.

"I've never seen such marvellously blue flowers—I'll arrange them in the copper jug. . . ."

Phil's expression relaxed a little.

"I thought you would," he said. "Or you might put them in a dull pewter vase. . . ."

"All right, then . . . I'll put them in a pewter vase."

Philip was amazed at the gentleness of her voice. She saw his astonishment, looked at him directly, and with her ready, almost masculine smile, she said on a different note :

“ Tell me, Monsieur Phil . . . I’m going to ask you one question, a perfectly harmless question . . . did you pick those lovely teasels to please me ? ”

“ Yes. . . . ”

“ To please me ? That was sweet of you. But did you think more of the pleasure they would give me—listen carefully, now—than ‘of the pleasure *you* would get in giving them to me ? ”

He listened to her dully, and watched her speak, as though he were a deaf-mute trying to gather her meaning from the movement of her lips and the fluttering of her eyelashes. He did not grasp her question, and answered haphazard :

“ I thought you might like to have the

flowers. . . . And besides, you'd invited me to have some orangeade. . . . ”

She took away the hand that she had laid on Phil's arm, and swung the half-closed gate wide open.

“ I see . . . you'd better go away and stop away, my dear child. . . . ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ Nobody asked you to be polite to me. Please consider yourself quite free of the troublesome duty which brought you here to-day to bombard me with blue teasles. Good-bye, Monsieur Phil—that is unless. . . . ”

She leaned her expressive face against the gate that was now closed between them, and threw a searching glance at Phil standing motionless in the narrow roadway.

“ That is, unless you come here, not to pay for my orangeade with a prickly bunch of flowers, but for another reason. . . . ”

“ Another reason ? . . . ”

“Our voices sound exactly alike, Monsieur Phil. Next time, we shall see whose point of view comes first, yours or mine. . . . I only like beggars and starving people, Monsieur Phil. If you come again, come as a beggar. . . . Now you can go, Monsieur Phil ! ”

She walked away from the gate, and Philip jumped on to his bicycle. Although he had been turned away—sent into exile—his manly pride was still intact, and he took away with him a picture of the dark scrolled ironwork of the gate crowning, as though it were a spray of laurustinus, the face of a woman whose cheek bore the stigma of newly-spilt blood.

x

X

“You’ll slip in a minute, Vinca—your shoe’s undone. Wait a sec. . . .”

Philip stooped down quickly, and crossed the white woollen tapes round one firm brown ankle. Vinca’s legs reminded him of the tapering limbs of some lithe animal, and the hardened skin, the hundred and one abrasions, could not disguise their charm. There was hardly any flesh on the delicate bones, and just enough muscle to give the requisite curve; Vinca’s legs, although they aroused no sensuous

thoughts, evoked the impersonal appreciation that is inspired by a work of art.

“Wait a sec, I say ! How can I tie up these tapes if you will keep on walking ? ”

“Let go, can't you ? ”

The bare foot in its canvas sandal slipped from his detaining grasp, and cleared Phil's head, where he knelt, as lightly as though it were flying. He caught a suggestion of lavender-water and freshly-ironed linen mingled with the smell of seaweed which was Vinca's particular perfume, and saw her standing three steps away from him. She was looking at him from head to foot with her shadowed and anxious eyes, whose blue was steadfast, unlike the restless colours of the sea.

“What's up with you ? What a fuss you're making ! I suppose I can do up a shoe, can't I ? Really, Vinca, you're getting impossible ! ”

In contradiction to his chivalrous

attitude, Philip's face assumed the expression of an offended young god with sun-gilt cheeks, and a mouth whose beauty was not yet impaired by the shadow of a coming moustache.

Vinca stayed where she was. She seemed taken by surprise, and parted a little, as though Phil had been running after her.

She made a little negative movement, relented, and threw herself down among the sage and pink knot-grass, pulling the hem of her frock down over her ankles. Her gestures were swift, angular and delightful; there was a sense of balance and rhythm in her every movement. Her exclusive friendship with Phil had accustomed her to athletics, developing in her a keen sense of games-rivalry which continued to flourish in spite of the love which had been born in her from the beginning. But in spite of the influence that grew appallingly greater day by day, banishing confidence and peace,

in spite of the love that troubled the wellspring of their affection, clouding its clarity, as roses change the colour of the water they drain—in spite of all this, they sometimes forgot the burden of their love.

Philip could not face Vinca's eyes, whose shadowed blue held no hint of reproach. She seemed only taken by surprise, and drew quick breaths, as does a doe who sights a stranger in the woodland, and hesitates, panting, instead of escaping to the wild. She was analysing the impulse which had impelled her to snatch her foot away from his hand ; she knew that she had been actuated by mistrust—not by false shame, but by an instinctive recoil. Their love was far too great to admit of false shame.

But Vinca's watchful purity had recognised from recent signs that there was a woman in Philip's life. She had acquired a trick of sniffing the air

around him, as though she suspected him of smoking or devouring sweets in secret. She would suddenly put an end to their conversations with a leaden silence or with an intense look that struck him dumb ; and when they strolled out after dinner, she would take her fingers, smaller but less delicately-shaped than his, from his retaining hand.

Philip had had no difficulty in hiding his third and fourth visits to Madame Dalleray from Vinca. But distance and walls are no barriers to a loving heart that instinctively senses treachery, and contracts in agony. Her secret knowledge deformed Philip in her eyes, innocent though he was in fact. He was soft and yielding to her now when he ought to have treated her as his slave, secure in his lover's tyranny. Something of the unfaithful husband's conciliatory manner had crept into his attitude, throwing him under suspicion.

Philip took exception to Vinca's strange mood, and this time, with an air of bravado, set out leisurely on the road to the villa. In another hour would he be enjoying the *goûter* at Ker-Anna to which Madame Dalleray had invited him?

Invited? She ordered about him whom she had raised to the rank of a starving beggar, and directed him with a firmness of purpose which she dissimulated. The beggar rebelled against his humiliation; he could be ungrateful when he was away from her, could think without thanks of the dispenser of cool drinks, of the white hands that peeled fruit for him, of the presence that tended the infatuated novice. But the word "novice" could hardly be applied to this boy, crowned with manhood, and kept virginal by a love sprung from childhood; and so, where she might have found an easy victim, who took pleasure in being malleable clay

in her hands, Madame Dalleray found a fascinated, yet wary, foe. In spite of the changed expression of his mouth, in spite of his outstretched hands, the beggar took on no semblance of defeat.

"He'll fight against me," she surmised. "He's keeping himself from me. . . ." She had not yet admitted to herself that what she meant was, "*She* is keeping him from me. . . ."

From the house, Philip called to Vinca in the sandy meadow: "I'm going to get the second post. Anything you want?"

Vinca shook her head, swinging the even strands of her hair into a sun-gilded nimbus, and Philip flung himself on his bicycle.

Madame Dalleray appeared not to expect him, and was reading. But he knew otherwise, as he took in the studied darkness of the room, the almost-invisible table whence arose the mingled

scents of late peaches, cantaloup melon cut in crescents, and black coffee poured over mounded ice.

Madame Dalleray put down her book and, without rising, held out her hand. In the gloom he saw her white dress and white hands ; her eyes looked out of their pencilled shadows with an unusual languor.

“ Were you asleep ? ” asked Phil, forcing himself to be conversational.

“ No, of course I wasn’t asleep. Is it very hot ? Are you hungry ? ”

“ I don’t know. . . . ”

He sighed, really undecided, though, since he had arrived at Ker-Anna, he had felt a thirst and an appreciation of the savour of the fruit that certainly might have passed as hunger and thirst, had not a nameless anxiety constricted his throat. In the meantime, his hostess had helped him, and on the small silver spoon he inhaled the fragrance of the rosy slice of melon that had been

sprinkled with sugar and dipped in a mild aniseed-flavoured liqueur.

“Are your people well, Monsieur Phil?”

He looked at her in surprise. She seemed absent-minded, and did not appear to have heard her own words. His sleeve brushed against a spoon, which fell on the carpet with a faint tinkle.

“How clumsy you are! . . . Wait a minute. . . .”

With one hand she caught hold of his wrist, and with the other she rolled up his sleeves as far as his elbow, holding his bare arm in her warm hand.

“Let me go!” cried Phil loudly, and he pulled his arm violently away. A saucer crashed into pieces at his feet. Through the humming in his ears he heard the echo of Vinca’s cry: “Let go! . . .” and he turned an angry questioning glance on Madame Dalle-ray. She had not stirred, and the hand

which he had thrown off lay like a hollow shell on her lap. For a long time Philip took the measure of this meaning stillness. He lowered his eyes, and through his mind there flashed overwhelming, incoherent pictures of flights that were like dream-flights, of swift descents that were like diving at that moment when the ripples meet the diver's reflected face—then unhurriedly, with studied coolness and deliberate courage, he put his bare arm back in her open hand.

XI

It was about half-past one in the morning when Philip came out of Ker-Anna.

He had had to wait until every light had been extinguished, every sound had ceased, before starting from the family villa. A latched glass door, a wooden barrier that yielded to his strength—and beyond lay the road and freedom. Freedom? He had gone down to Ker-Anna heavily burdened, pausing occasionally to draw in deep breaths of air, his left hand over his heart, his

head now bent, now raised like a dog baying the moon. On the crest of the hill, he had turned to look at the house where his people, and Vinca's people—and Vinca—were sleeping. . . . She must be lying behind those closed shutters, half on her side, her head buried in her arm, as a crying child hides its face, and the even strands of her hair spread fanwise from the nape of her neck to her cheek. During their childhood he had so often seen her asleep, and he knew by heart the sorrowful touching aspect that she never wore in her waking moments.

The fear of rousing her telepathically had turned his steps aside towards the road that gleamed white in the milky radiance of the young moon. During his light sleep, he had felt all his love and uneasiness stir in him, and press upon him with their dead-weight. Might not that dead-weight (heavier by far than the icy terror that freezes a boy of sixteen

on the track of his first experience) transmute joy to weariness, winged ecstasy to a smirched curiosity? . . . But he had only hesitated for a moment before hurrying onward with that same sense of suffocation, that same gesture of baying the moon, over the slope of the hill down which he was now slowly returning.

“Two o’clock!” counted Philip, as he listened to the chimes from the village steeple. Four crystalline notes for the four quarters, two solemn strokes for the two hours, came softly to him through the warm, salt-laden mist.

“‘When you can hear the church clock, the wind has veered, and the weather’s on the change,’” quoted Phil, and the proverbial tag sounded as faintly in his ears as though it were an echo from a dead world. . . . He sat down on the grassy border of a flower-bed in front of the villa and burst into a fit of crying, suddenly feeling ashamed

when he realised that he was luxuriating in his tears.

Somebody close by heaved a great sigh ; the caretaker's dog, indistinct in the gloom, was drowsing at his feet in the sandy alley. Philip stooped down to stroke the coarse hair and dry nose of the friendly creature who had not barked at him.

“ Fanfare . . . good old Fanfare . . . ”

But the dog, who was old, and had a Breton disposition, got up, and then lay down farther off, out of Phil's reach, with the sound of an old sack collapsing.

Hidden by the mist at the foot of the meadow, the slack tide rippled feebly up the beach with the faint sound of a wet cloth flapping in the wind. No bird was on the wing, except an owl that slyly hooted like a cat, now from the spindle-tree hedge, now from the top of an aspen that was whiter than the mist.

Slowly Philip's thoughts pieced together the familiar, yet unfamiliar,

landscape. The peace of night that frees the spirit enfolded him, and bridged the yawning abyss between his old existence—his happy summer kingdom—and that other world that span giddily in a storm of conflicting colours, perfumes, and lights, the hidden source of which was a sharp pang and a blank negation ; that other world where furniture and flowers seemed to lose their immobility, the furniture disporting its thin, doe-like legs, the flowers exposing their downy under-leaves, their stems rigid in the clear water ; that other world with its treacherous winds, where the touch of a woman's hand, the pressure of a woman's mouth, could let loose destruction on his haven of peace ; that other world where the gleaming curve of a woman's arm, like the arc of a rainbow that spans the sky after storm, had precipitated disaster. . . .

At any rate, he was leaving behind him all the torture that he had endured.

All he now felt was the weariness of an exhausted swimmer, the vague and impersonal relief of a shipwrecked sailor touching shore, and in this he was more fortunate than other boys of his age who barter their hunger and its unbounded visions for a momentary consummation that will always limit their dreams. He had come back from his quest stunned, yet conscious, as a drunkard is conscious of the cooled-down wine that heaves within him as he moves, the wine from which arose a heady and burning ardour. . . .

The day was still far off, but already the night was waning, and one half of the sky was growing light. Some tiny creature—a rat or a hedgehog—made a scratching sound as it pattered along. The dawn-wind scattered a few petals in the alley, then died away, leaving the air as still as before. Three o'clock sounded dreamily from the distant steeple, the first chime near and clear,

the last strokes lost in a sudden gust of wind. A pair of curlews flew so low over Philip that he heard the straining of their outspread wings, and their wailing cries over the water sank into his quivering and receptive memory, calling up to him his fifteen stainless years that had been spent moored to a golden shore, his fifteen stainless years that had been linked to a child who had grown up at his side, and who carried her shining head as upright as a sword.

He got up, and, leaning against the fence, vacantly stroking the curled-up dog, made a physical effort to identify the self who had been sitting there with that other self who had set out so fearfully earlier in the evening towards Ker-Anna. But the two selves would not be reconciled.

He passed his hot hands over his face. In his imagination, they were smoother than usual, and there seemed to be scent on them, indistinguishable when

he sniffed it, but which quivered in the air about him like the scent of certain delicate-leaved plants. At that moment a light gleamed behind the shutters of Vinca's room, only to be extinguished a little later.

“ She's awake. She's just looked to see what time it is. Why isn't she asleep ? ”

Standing outside the house, he knew exactly how Vinca had stretched out her arm to light the lamp, how she had looked at the tiny watch that hung from the brass bed-rail, and how, when she had turned out the light, she had flung her head, with its childishly-fragrant hair, back once more on the pillow. He knew exactly how she would lie, as the night was so hot, with one bare brown shoulder (a ribbon of white girdling it where the strap of her bathing-dress had protected it from the sun) thrust out of the clothes—and her slim, healthy body, Vinca's well-known body that each year waxed in

anticipated beauty, danced before his eyes and confused his senses.

What was there in common between this body, between the uses that love might make of it, between its inevitable destiny—what had it in common with the fate of that other woman's body, practised in delight, endowed with a genius for destruction, that body that had opposed to him a passionate resistance, that body that had falsely schooled him in sensuous joy . . . ?

“Never ! . . .” he said loudly.

Even up to yesterday, he had been reckoning the time that must elapse before Vinca could be entirely his. To-day, pale with a knowledge that left his body with the tremors and lassitude of defeat, he shuddered with all his being at a crazy image that formed in his brain. . . .

“Never ! . . .”

Dawn broke swiftly over the sky. But there was no wind to disperse the

salt-laden mist, overstrewn now with rosy patches of cloud. Philip crossed the threshold of the villa, went upstairs to his room which night had rendered suffocatingly hot, and hurriedly threw back the shutters, anxious to look at his new, experienced face in the glass. . . .

He saw a wan, drawn face with weary eyes whose size was accentuated by leaden circles ; he saw a mouth that was still lightly smeared with red from the touch of a reddened mouth ; he saw dark, disordered hair over a pale brow—sorrowful features that were less like those of a man than the features of a young girl who has died by violence.

XII

XII

The goldfinches were twittering over the crumbs that Vinca threw to them as Philip fell asleep. His uneasy slumber was pierced by their chirps, and in his half-dream each chirp became an iron nail that was being hammered into his aching head. When he awoke fully, the lovely morning was full of the cluckings of laying hens, the buzz of bees, and the noise of the corn-thresher ; the choppy sea had turned greenish under the cool north-west wind, and Vinca, dressed in white, stood laughing under his window.

“What’s the matter with you, Phil? Are you suffering from sleeping-sickness?”

And the Household Shades, who had grown almost as indistinguishable as the ancient stain on the wall, as unnoticeable as ivy or moss, and who were looked on with indifference by the two children, re-echoed :

“What’s the matter with him? Has he been eating opium?”

He looked down at them from his window. His lips were parted, his face was so pale, and his expression so full of bewildered horror, that Vinca’s laugh died away, all the laughter ceased suddenly.

“Oh. . . . Are you ill?”

He started away from the window as though Vinca had hurled a pebble at him.

“Ill? I’ll soon show you whether I’m ill or not. I say, though, what’s the time?”

The laughter rose again.

“It’s a quarter to eleven, lazybones. Come down and bathe.”

He nodded, and shut the window. The smothering net curtains filled the room with a gloom that plunged him back into the night-abyss from whose depths the spectre of remembrance rose, dark and insidious, stalking between luminous blurs of light that resolved themselves into the colours of gold and flesh and the shining glance of an eye and a ring and a fingernail. . . .

He flung off his pyjamas and hastily got into his bathing-suit, but, instead of going down in it, as he usually did, he carefully knotted the girdle of his bath-gown.

Vinca was waiting for him on the beach, placidly allowing her arms and legs to bake to the colour of brown farmhouse bread. The matchless blue of her eyes beneath the faded blue

scarf filled Philip with a thirst for cold water and a longing for the billows and the breeze. Simultaneously, he realised the vigour of her body, which was daily rounding out. He looked at her firm, delicately-proportioned knees, and at the rippling muscles of her thighs.

“How strong she is,” he thought with a kind of awe.

They dived together, but, while Vinca exuberantly splashed up the tiny waves with her feet and hands, singing as she spouted the water out of her mouth, Philip, who was white, tried to overcome his shivering fit, and swam with clenched teeth. He stopped swimming suddenly when Vinca caught his foot between her two bare feet, and dived under a wave, to reappear a few seconds later. But he did not reciprocate her advances, and would have none of their usual play—the screams and struggles and imitations of seals that made the bathing hour the pleasantest of the day.

They swam back to the hot sand, and dried themselves briskly. Vinca, picking up a stone, aimed it at a jutting rock about fifty yards off with an accuracy that roused Philip's grudging admiration, not realising that he himself had trained her to these feats. He felt weak, outside himself, on the point of collapse—there was no virility in him to betray the fact that, the night before, he had left childhood behind him.

"It's twelve o'clock. Phil. Can't you hear the church clock striking?"

Vinca was on her feet, shaking out wet strands of hair. With the first step she took she crushed a small crab, and Philip shuddered painfully.

"What's the matter?" asked Vinca.

"You've just squashed a baby crab. . . ."

She turned round, and the sun streamed on her flushed apricot cheeks and steady blue eyes, on her white teeth and rosy gums.

"Well, what about it? It isn't the first, anyhow. And you don't mind baiting the nets with bits of cut-up crab, do you?"

She ran on ahead, and jumped and cleared a gap in the sand-hill. For the fraction of a second he saw her suspended above the earth, her body bent, her feet together, her arms curved forward as though she were gathering up an armful of air.

"I thought she was tender-hearted," Phil said to himself.

The memory of last night, which had lain torpid during the morning, hardly stirring in the dark depths of his mind, rushed back to him at lunch. He had to endure compliments on his poetic pallor and his loss of appetite. Vinca was thoroughly enjoying her meal, and Philip was stung by her care-free manner. He watched her inimically as she pounded a lobster-claw with her strong hands, and shook back her hair with a proud turn of her throat.

"I suppose I ought to be pleased that she doesn't suspect anything," he thought. But all the same he was hurt by her untroubled serenity, and at the bottom of his heart he would have liked to have seen her trembling like a leaf, horror-stricken at the betrayal which (like one of those summer storms that come and go over the coast of Brittany) she should have sensed in the atmosphere.

"She said she loved me. I know she loves me. And yet she was much more concerned about me *before* . . ."

After lunch, Vinca and Lisette danced to the gramophone. She insisted that Phil dance also. She studied the hours of the tides, got the nets ready for low tide at four o'clock, filled the villa with schoolgirl cries and appeals to Philip for the tarred string and her old pocket-knife, diffusing around her a smell of seaweed and iodine from her torn old fishing-sweater. Exhausted and

overcome by that longing for sleep that is consequent on great grief and great joy, Philip watched her activities vindictively, and nervously tightened his knuckles.

“I could stop her with a couple of words,” he thought, but he knew that those words would remain unsaid. All he wanted now was to fall asleep in a hollow of the sand-hills, his head on Vinca’s lap. . . .

Down on the beach they found shrimps, and gurnards who spread their fan-like fins and swelled out their rainbow gullets with air to terrify their captors. But Phil half-heartedly pursued the smaller fry ; the sunlight reflected in the pools dazzled him, and he stumbled over the slippery ribbons of seaweed as though he had never set foot on them before. They succeeded in catching a lobster, and Vinca violently thrashed the water of a pool where a conger-eel lived.

"He is there, you see," she cried, as she showed him the end of the hook, which was dyed red.

Philip went white and shut^d his eyes.

"Leave the wretched creature alone," he said in a muffled voice.

"Leave it alone? I bet I catch it. . . . What on earth's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

He was doing his utmost to conceal a nameless grief. What had he gained last night in the scented darkness, in those arms that had eagerly offered him victory and initiation? Had he won only the right to suffer? Had he achieved nothing but a faltering weakness in the presence of this innocent, insensitive child? Had he only attained a perception that made him shudder at a helpless creature's pain, at the spilling of its life's blood? . . .

He breathed in the air as though he were choking, covered his face with his

hands, and burst out crying. He sobbed so wildly that he had to sit down, and Vinca stood there, holding the blood-stained hook as though it were an implement of torture. She stooped down to him, not asking the cause of his tears, but listening with ears attuned to the new cadence, the clear meaning of his sobs. She put out a hand and touched his forehead, instantly drawing it back. Her dazed expression changed to a look of proud contempt for the weakness she suspected in the sobbing Philip, and her features twisted into a timeless mask of bitterness and grief. Then she carefully picked up her fishing-net and the raffia basket in which her catch was flapping about, fastened the hook to her belt as though it were a sword, and, without looking back, walked steadily away.

XIII

It was not until dinner-time that he saw her again. She had changed her beach-clothes for the pink-embroidered *crépon* frock whose blue exactly matched her eyes. He noticed that she was wearing white stockings and kid shoes, and this conventional attire made him uneasy.

“Are any visitors coming to dinner?” he asked one of the Household Shades.

“Can’t you see how many places have been laid?” replied the Shade with a shrug.

August was drawing to a close, and they dined by lamplight, the doors thrown wide open to show the green sunset sky where a streak of dull red still glimmered. The sailless sea, bluish-black like a swallow's wing, was calm and still, and in the pauses between conversation the diners could hear the regular lap-lap of the slack tide. As they sat there among the Shades, Philip tried to catch Vinca's glance so that he might test the strength of that invisible thread that had bound them together for so long, and that had kept them from succumbing to the invariable melancholy that falls at the end of a meal, the end of a season, the end of a day. But she lowered her eyes to her plate, and the lamplight glowed on her eyelids, her rounded sunburnt cheeks, and the curve of her small chin. Philip felt himself completely alone, and stared beyond the strip of coast—almost entirely cut off by the sea—that was

shaped like a lion about to spring, and over which hung three stars, towards the moonlit road that led to Ker-Anna. Only a few more hours, only a little more darkness to quench with its ashes the lingering fires of sunset, only a few more nightly repeated sentences : " Ten o'clock already—you children don't seem to realise that we go to bed early in these parts." " I haven't been doing anything much, Madame Audebert, but I feel as tired as though I'd been on the go all day. . . ." A little more clattering of plates, the noisy rattle of dominoes on the polished surface of the table, another wailing protest from Lisette, who, three parts asleep, refused to go to bed . . . one more attempt to extract a look, a secret smile of understanding from a mysteriously aloof Vinca, and the hour would strike, that hour when, the night before, Philip had stolen furtively out. . . . He thought about it without any definite plan or

desire—it was as though he were being driven by Vinca's vagaries to seek another shelter, to lean his head against a soft shoulder, to find the rekindling that his burnt-out senses craved, extinguished as they were by the hostility that is part of a boy's first experience. . . .

The evening came to its usual end. Lisette, whimpering, was borne off by a maid, and Madame Ferret deposited the double-six on the shining surface of the table.

“Are you coming out, Vinca? These moths fluttering into the lamps are getting on my nerves. . . .”

She followed him in silence towards the sea, where the afterglow lingered long after twilight.

“Shall I get you your scarf?”

“No, thanks.”

They walked on, bathed in the thin blue vapour, smelling of thyme, that rose from the sea-meadow. Philip checked himself as he was about to

take Vinca's arm, and was horrified at his caution.

"Oh, God, what's happened to us? Have we lost each other? She doesn't know what has happened *down there*, and if I can only forget it, perhaps we shall be as happy and as unhappy as we were before; perhaps we shall belong to one another again."

But he could not bring himself to believe in this possibility, for Vinca was walking beside him as coldly and quietly as though love had gone out of her, leaving her blind to his agony. And Philip, feeling that the *hour* was at hand, was overcome by a fit of trembling that was like the ague that had seized him when the salt water stung the wound made in his arm the day before by a weever. . . .

He stopped and wiped his forehead.

"I'm suffocating—I'm ill, Vinca."

"You're ill," she echoed.

He thought she was coming round,

and made a quick movement towards her.

"How sweet you are!" he said eagerly. "Oh, dearest . . ."

"No," she interrupted, "I'm not sweet at all."

The childish phrase raised Philip's hopes, and he caught hold of her bare arm.

"I know what's the matter. You're sick with me because I howled like a woman this morning. . . ."

"Not like a woman. ; . . ."

He blushed in the darkness, and attempted to explain.

"Don't you understand? It was that conger you were hurting. . . . The wretched thing's blood on your hook. . . . It suddenly made me heart-sick . . ."

"Oh, yes . . . it made your heart . . . sick. . . ."

Her voice was so full of meaning that Philip caught his breath in fear. "She knows," he thought and waited for the

whole miserable story to come out, followed by a storm of tears and reproaches. But Vinca said nothing, and after a long pause, like the calm after a storm, he ventured nervously :

“ Are you pretending not to like me any more just because I cried ? ”

Vinca turned and looked at him, her face luminously-white in the gloom between the stiff curtain of her hair.

“ Oh, Phil, I love you all the time. What you did hasn't changed anything.”

He felt his heart pumping in his throat.

“ Do you mean that ? Then you'll forgive me for being such a cry-baby—for being so idiotic ? ”

She only hesitated a second.

“ Yes, I'll forgive you, Phil. But even that doesn't change anything.”

“ Change what ? ”

“ Us, Phil.”

She spoke with a kind of far-seeingness that Philip dared not question, with a

gentleness from which he dared hope nothing. Vinca must have followed his thoughts, for she added subtly :

“Do you remember that just three weeks ago we were both working ourselves up because we had to wait four or five years before we could marry? . . . Poor Phil, I wish now that I could go back and be a baby again. . . .”

He sensed how she underlined and put into asterisks that pregnant syllable “now,” and the word seemed to be engraved on the clear blue August night. But Vinca had learnt how to protect herself with silence.

“Then you’re not angry with me any more?” he asked insistently. “Tomorrow we shall be—we shall be Vinca and Phil again, as we always were, shan’t we? Vinca and Phil for always?”

“For ever, if you like, Phil. Let’s go in now—it’s cold.”

She had said “For ever,” but not, as he had said : “As we always were.”

Yet he satisfied himself with her partial acquiescence, and took comfort from the cold little hand clasped for a moment in his. But in that second the unwinding of the well-cord, the bell-like sound of the empty pail on the brink, the creak of curtains being pulled across the rods at an open window, the last waking sounds of the day, told Philip that the hour was at hand, that hour for which he had waited on the previous night before unfastening the door of the villa and stealing out unseen. . . . Oh, secret red glimmer of an unknown room . . . dark ecstasy, slow annihilation, life laid bare beneath slow-beating wings. . . .

As though he had been waiting since last night for Vinca's absolution, for the ambiguous absolution that she had just given him with such sincerity of speech, such restraint of words, he suddenly appraised with a man's sense of values the gift that a lovely and arbitrary she-devil had given him. .

XIV

“Has the date for your return to Paris been fixed?” asked Madame Dalleray.

‘We always leave on September 25th,” said Phil. “If the 25th happens to be a Sunday, we leave on the 23rd or the 24th or the 26th. But it’s always just about that date.”

“I see . . . that means you’ll be leaving more or less about this time a fortnight from now. . . .”

Philip took his eyes from the grey sea that lapped placidly against the sand,

and turned towards Madame Dalleray with surprise. Draped in an ample white garment that made her look like a South Sea Islander, her hair beautifully arranged, her face dusted with powder that harmonised exactly with her skin, she was smoking reflectively, and there was nothing to show that the young man sitting not far away from her, as handsome and sunburnt as herself, bore any other relationship to her than that of a younger brother. . . .

“And so, at this time a fortnight from to-day, you’ll be . . . where will you be ? ”

“ I’ll be on the lake in the Bois, or else playing tennis at Boulogne with . . . with friends of mine.”

He blushed, for Vinca’s name had been on the tip of his tongue, and Madame Dalleray smiled, that frank smile of hers which made her look like a handsome boy. Philip stared at the sea again to hide his face, which now

bore the cruel expression of a young, angry god. A smooth, firm hand covered his, and, although he still looked seawards, his mouth relaxed, he veiled his eyes with his lids, and his whole face was expressive of an emotion that was both pain and ecstasy. . . .

"You mustn't feel sad," said Madame Dalleray softly.

"I don't feel in the least sad," protested Philip eagerly. "You can't understand. . . ."

She bent her head with its shining hair.

"That's right. I can't understand. There's something I can't understand."

"Oh. . . ."

* With innate distrust, Philip gazed at the woman who had revealed the terrifying mystery to him. Did her small pink ears still re-echo with that low smothered cry which was like the cry of a victim whose throat is being cut? . . . Those arms, whose strong muscles were

hardly visible, had carried him lightly in his swoon from one world to another ; that mouth, so niggardly in speech, had come close to whisper an all-powerful word to his, to breathe the faint echo of a chant that rose from depths where life is one vast cataclysmic convulsion. . . . She knew everything. . . .

“ There’s something I don’t understand,” she repeated, as though Philip’s silence needed an answer. “ But you don’t like being asked questions . . . and sometimes I’m a little devastating. . . .”

“ As devastating as a flash of lightning,” thought Philip. “ When a streak of lightning splits the sky, things that have lain hidden even from the glare of day come to light. . . .”

“ All I was going to ask you was—will you be glad to leave me ? ”

He stared down at his bare feet. A loose garment of embroidered silk gave him the look of an Indian prince, and accentuated his good looks.

"Will *you* be glad?" he asked awkwardly.

The ash from Madame Dalleray's cigarette crumbled on the carpet.

"That's not the point. I asked you about Philip Audebert, not about Camille Dalleray."

He looked up with the surprise he always felt at hearing her Christian name. "Camille . . . yes, of course she's called Camille. She might just as well do without it. I always think of her as Madame Dalleray, or the lady in white, or She. . . ."

She was smoking slowly and watching the sea. Was she young? Yes, she was young — thirty-one, or thirty-two at most. Inscrutable, too, like those calm beings whose expression never exceeds a mild irony, and whose mouths are either smiling or grave. Still looking at the low spread of sky where a storm was brooding, she took Philip's hand in hers, pressing it, not because she cared for

him, but for her own individual pleasure. Beneath the pressure of the imperious little hand he felt constrained to pour out his assurances, much as squeezed fruit drips out its juice.

"I shall be very sorry to leave you. But I hope it won't make me unhappy."

"Is that how you feel? And why do you hope that?"

He smiled faintly, pathetic and clumsy as she secretly liked him to be.

"I'm hoping not to be unhappy because I think you'll fix something up," he said. "You will arrange it for us, won't you?"

She shrugged her shoulders, arched her thin brows, and made a slight effort to smile with her usual calmness and contempt.

"Fix something up?" she repeated. "You mean, I suppose, that I shall invite you to come and see me, if it still

amuses me, when you're free from your school-classes and your . . . family ties ? ”

He seemed surprised at her tone, but did not flinch from her look.

“ Yes, that's what I mean,” he said. “ What else is there to do ? Why are you angry about it ? I can't run about loose as I like, and I'm only sixteen and a half. . . . ”

She flushed slowly.

“ I'm not angry about anything. . . . But can't you realise that another woman—not myself, naturally—might be offended at the suggestion that all you want is an hour alone with her, and nothing else ? . . . ”

Philip listened to her with a school-boy attention, his eyes fixed on her reserved mouth and her jealous eyes which yet made no demand on him.

“ No,” he said readily, “ I can't imagine why you should feel hurt

because I asked 'only that.' " Oh, "only that" . . .

He was silent, overtaken for the second time by that same pallor, that same sense of joyful amaze, and Camille Dalleray wavered as she considered the homage that she owed to her handiwork. As though dazzled, Philip let his head fall forwards, and his submissive gesture momentarily intoxicated his victor.

"Do you love me?" she asked in a low voice.

He started, and looked at her fearfully.

"Why—why do you ask me that?"

She regained her control, and the dubious smile was again on her lips.

"I was only joking, Philip. . . ."

For a second he still questioned her with his eyes, inwardly censuring her for speaking so wildly.

"A man would have said 'yes' to what I asked," reflected Madame Dalleray.

“ But if I insist on an answer, this boy will burst out sobbing, and swear to me through his tears and kisses that he doesn’t love me. Shall I make him answer me ? If I do, I shall have to stop seeing him, or listen, on tenterhooks to what he says while I try to gauge from his words the extent of my influence on him.”

She was aware of an agonising contraction where her heart throbbed, and, getting up with a careless movement, she walked towards the open bay window as though oblivious of Phil’s presence. The smell of the small blue mussels, left high and dry by the tide at the foot of the rocks four hours ago, came into the room, mingled with the thick scent that rose from the dying privet.

Leaning on the sill, with an apparently *distract* air, Madame Dalleray was conscious that Philip was lying down in the room behind her, and she was

weighed down by a thought that refused to leave her.

“He’s waiting for me. He’s thinking of the pleasure he hopes to get from me. The first passer-by could have stooped and picked up what he gave me. When I mention his people to him, this shy, middle-class youth shuts up like an oyster, and changes the subject to his classes. As for the name ‘Vinca,’ it double-locks him into a fortress of silence and shame. . . . He’s learnt nothing from me but the easiest thing of all . . . the easiest. Every time he comes here, he brings with him and puts on and off, like his clothes, this . . . this . . .”

She found herself hesitating at the word “love,” and moved away from the window. Eagerly Philip watched her draw near. She laid her arms on his shoulders, and, with an almost violent gesture, pulled his dark head down on one bare arm. Thus burdened, she hastened toward that dark and narrow

realm where pride made her interpret self-pity as a cry for help, that dark and narrow realm where beggars of her kind are under the illusion that they are the givers. . . .

XV

The sage glistened with the rain that had fallen for several hours during the night ; the raindrops had decked the privet in new green, freshened the magnolia-leaves, and bedewed, without breaking, the gauzy webs that protected a nest of caterpillars in the pine. The wind, though it left the sea calm, muttered thinly under the doors, and in its cadences were memories of the year that was over, rumours of baked chestnuts and ripe apples. . . . The coolness of the morning urged Philip to

put on a dark blue woollen sweater under his shirt. He was down last to breakfast, a usual occurrence now that it was late in the night before he fell into a troubled and unquiet sleep. He ran down, looking for Vinca, as though he were seeking to find a shining pathway beyond the dark shadow of a wall. But she was not in the hall, where the damp had brought out the scent of varnished woodwork and canvas-cloth.

A fine drift of rain sprayed the air and clung to his skin without wetting it. A yellow aspen-leaf, falling from the bough, hung before him for a second with meaning grace, then quivered and fell swiftly to the ground, as though borne down by an unseen weight. He stood listening, and heard the wintry sound of the furnace being stoked up in the kitchen. In one of the rooms, Lisette was uttering shrill protests and shedding tears:

“ I say, Lisette, where’s Vinca ? ” he called.

“ I d-don’t know,” wailed her small voice, hoarse with sobs.

A sharp gust of wind blew one of the slates off the roof, and hurled it to the ground in front of Philip. He looked at the fragments in a stunned way, as though a looking-glass that foretells seven years’ bad luck if it is broken had shivered at his feet. . . . He felt as though he were a very small boy, far-distant from happiness, but he had no impulse to seek out the woman who lived in the pine-shadowed villa on the other side of the bay, even though she would have welcomed his faint-heartedness, his need to lean on her unshakable woman’s strength. . . . He searched through the house, but caught no glimpse of a golden head, no sight of the dress that was blue like teasels, nor yet of the sponge-cloth frock, that was the white of a young mushroom. The

slim, sunburnt legs, with their delicately turned knees, did not come running to meet him ; the blue eyes, that held two or three shades of blue and a hint of mauve, did not glance out to gladden his own. . . .

“ Vinca ! Where are you, Vinca ? ”

“ Here I am,” said a voice quite close to him.

“ Where ? In the garage ? ”

“ Yes.”

Stooping down in the cold light that streamed in through the door of the windowless shed, Vinca was rummaging among a pile of stuff spread out on an old sheet.

“ What are you doing ? ”

“ Can’t you see ? I’m going over these things and sorting them out. We’re going away soon, so it has to be done. . . . Mother said so. . . . ”

She looked at Philip, and sat back, crossing her arms on her knees. Philip grew angry at the suggestion

of patient humility in her attitude.

“There’s no need to hurry about it. Anyway, why are you doing it?”

“Who else is there? If mother did it, she’d get a heart-attack as soon as she started.”

“Why can’t the maid see to it?”

Vinca shrugged her shoulders, and went on with her task, talking in a low voice to herself, like a swarm of busy work-girls keeping up a faint buzz of sound.

“Here are Lisette’s bathing-dresses, the blue one . . . the green one . . . the striped one. . . . I might as well throw them away, they’re no use. . . . That’s my frock with the pink embroidery—it might stand another wash . . . one pair, two pairs, three pairs of my beach-shoes . . . and that’s Phil’s . . . and that’s Phil’s . . . two old Aertex shirts of Phil’s . . . the cuffs are frayed, but the fronts are all right. . . .”

She held them out, discovered a

couple of holes, and made a face. Philip looked at her ungratefully, torn by conflicting feelings. The early hour, the grey light beneath the tiled roof, Vinca's simple task, combined to fill him with discomfort. A comparison, which had not occurred to him during his secret hours at Ker-Anna, now came into his mind, a comparison which did not yet extend to Vinca—Vinca who had been his altar of faith during childhood, Vinca whom he had chivalrously abandoned for the dramatic and necessary thrill of a first affair. . . .

The comparison started here, among these clothes scattered on a folded sheet, between the rough brick walls, in the presence of this child in the faded lavender smock. On her knees over her task, she paused to shake back her neatly-trimmed hair, soft and damp from the salty air and her daily swim. Her light-heartedness, which had diminished in the last fortnight, had been

replaced by a quieter mood, a persistent imperturbability that aroused Philip's uneasiness. Had this young housewife, with her hair cut square like a mediæval page's, really elected to die with him rather than wait for the time when they could both love openly? With knitted brows he brooded over the changed circumstances, but, though he looked at Vinca, he was scarcely thinking about her. Now that she was near him, the fear of losing her abated, and the crying need to have her for his own again ceased to torment him. But, because of her, a comparison arose. His new capacity for feeling, for suffering unexpectedly, the intolerance newly kindled in him by a fair freebooter, flamed up at the merest spark; made him honestly critical, made him condemn her both for her mediocrity and for her limitations. Not only was he becoming aware of that world of emotions which, for want of a better name,

we call the material world, but he felt also an urgent need to bring physical beauty to the shrine of unsubstantial perfection. He was filled with a growing hunger for those things that satisfy the senses of touch and hearing and sight—for velvet hangings, the studied music of a voice, perfumes. . . . He did not think the less of himself for this desire, for he felt uplifted when he came into contact with the intoxication of luxury, and his soul expanded beneath the Oriental silk garment that he wore in the secret darkness of Ker-Anna.

A vague and generous thought clumsily took shape in his mind. Not confessing to himself that he longed for a beautifully-dressed, subtly-scented Vinca, a Vinca beyond comparison, he tried to analyse the provocation he felt at her kneeling attitude, which detracted subtly from her charm. He flung out a few sarcastic sentences, to which Vinca made no reply. He grew more

biting, and she answered him with sufficient restraint to make him still angrier, and then ashamed of his anger. For a few moments he struggled to regain his self-control, apologising with a sort of flatness that pleased him. All the while, Vinca was patiently tying up beach-shoes in pairs and emptying streams of pink shells and dried sea-horses from pockets of worn-out sweaters. . . .

"It's all your fault," wound up Philip. "You won't say a word. . . . I'm fed up, I tell you. . . . You make me hurt you. Why do you do it?"

She let fall on him a look full of a woman's wisdom ripened by the contrivings and self-denials of an overwhelming love.

"At any rate, when you're hurting me, I know that you are near me," she said. . . .

XVI

“ Our life together is coming to an end this year,” thought Philip gloomily as he stared out at the sea. “ That being that was made up of Vinca and me, a being that ought to have been twice as happy as one person, that being’s going to die here this year. I can’t bear to think about it. If only I could do something. But I don’t do anything . . . and perhaps after ten o’clock to-night I shall go for the last time these holidays to Madame Dalleray’s. . . . ”

He hung his head, and his black hair fell forward disconsolately.

“If I were asked to go now to Madame Dalleray’s, I’d refuse. Why would I refuse?”

Gleaming white beneath a sultry sun shadowed by two storm-laden clouds, the road to Ker-Anna followed the foot of the hill, climbed up, and was lost in a clump of stiff, dusty juniper-trees. Philip looked away with a recoil that he knew to be only momentary. “I’d refuse to go now . . . but to-night . . .”

After three luncheons at Ker-Anna, he had given up these day-time visits, fearing to rouse his people’s doubts and Vinca’s suspicions. Moreover, his extreme youth soon wearied of having to provide alibis. Furthermore, he feared lest anyone should detect the strong, resinous scent that filled Ker-Anna, the scent exhaled from the naked or garmented body of the woman whom he named alternately (according to whether he was feeling the pride of a licentious little schoolboy, or the

stricken remorse of a husband who, in spite of himself, has deceived a dearly-loved wife) his mistress or his "master:"

...

"Whether I'm found out or not, this thing's got to stop. But why?"

From none of the books that he read openly, propped on his elbows on the sand, or alone in his room (more from reasons of shame than fear of discovery), from none of these books had he realised that anyone must needs perish in so mild a shipwreck. A novel has a hundred pages devoted to the inception of physical love: the actual happening is described in a mere fifteen lines, and Philip racked his brain in a vain effort to remember in which book he had read that a young man does not grow out of childhood or lose his purity in one cataclysmic fall, but that he totters with seismic quakings during long, long days. . . .

He got up and walked along the edge

of the sea-meadow that the equinoctial tides had fretted and crumbled. A bush of gorse, that had flowered again, hung precariously over the beach, only withheld by a thin straggle of roots. "When I was little," thought Phil, "that gorse didn't hang over like that. The sea's washed all that land away—a yard or more—while I've been growing up. . . . And Vinca swears that it's not the sea that's swept in, but the gorse-bush that's sprung forward. . . ."

Not far from the gorse-bush was that round hollow they called "Vinca's Eyes," because of the blue teasels with which it was carpeted. It was the place where Philip had secretly gathered a bunch of them, a spiny tribute which he had thrown over the wall of Ker-Anna. . . . The teasels were withered to-day—they looked as though they had been consumed. . . . Philip paused for a moment, too young to smile at the mystic significance with which love

endows a dead flower, a wounded bird, or a broken ring ; he threw off his sadness, stiffened his shoulders, and shook back his hair with a characteristically proud gesture, mentally uttering self-reproaches that would not have been out of place in a Sunday-school story.

“ This won’t do ; I must pull myself together. At any rate, I’ve grown into a man this year. And my future. . . .”

He caught the trend of his thoughts and blushed at himself. His future ? A month ago he had seen childish, cut-and-dried facts clearly outlined on a huge, indefinite canvas. . . . His future—that meant the examination-hall, another attempt to get his degree, distasteful tasks undertaken fairly ungrudgingly because “ these things have to be done, haven’t they ? ” . . . His future, and Vinca—his future, full of promise because of Vinca, cursed and blessed in Vinca’s name.

“ I was in the devil of a rush at the

beginning of the holidays," thought Philip. "But now . . ." He smiled, but his face was full of a man's pain. The down on his upper lip grew darker day by day, and the first hair of his coming moustache slightly swelled and inflamed a corner of his mouth, that mouth which Camille Dalleray's inscrutable, almost vindictive glance continually sought and left. . . .

"My future—let's think about my future. . . . It's perfectly straightforward. If I don't go in for engineering, I shall go into father's business, supplying refrigerators to houses and hotels, the sale of headlights and motor-accessories. I'll pass my finals, and then I shall go straight into the office, interview clients, look over correspondence. . . . Father hardly gets enough out of it to keep up the car. . . . Oh, I'd forgotten my military service . . . what am I thinking about? . . . I'd just been saying that after the exam. . . ."

The chain of his thoughts snapped abruptly, broken by a profound boredom, a complete indifference as to what the obvious future held for him. "If you do your military service in Paris, I shall be . . ." In his memory, Vinca's loving little voice whispered of a hundred plans they had formed during this very summer, plans that now had fallen flat and lifeless, plans that had neither colour nor substance. His rainbow hopes no longer overstepped the end of the day, when, after a game of chess with Vinca or Lisette (Lisette, for choice, whose eight aggressive years, sharp eyes, and precocious skill took him out of his sentimental preoccupation), that hour arrived when he could go in search of pleasure. . . . "And yet," he thought to himself, "I'm not at all sure that I'll go. I'm not a love-sick idiot, counting the minutes, and turning towards Ker-Anna like a sunflower towards the sun. Surely I can be myself,

surely I can go on enjoying everything that I enjoyed *before*. . . .”

He did not realise that with the word “before” he was sharply dividing the two halves of his existence. He did not realise that for ages to come his life would be calculated according to that landmark, that commonplace and yet miraculous boundary-stone : “Oh, yes, that was *before*. . . . I can remember that happening a little while *after*. . . .”

With jealous contempt, he thought of his school-friends who had stood trembling on the threshold of a brothel, to issue later, whistling loudly, liars and boasters, smirched with disgust, who quickly forgot their exploits, and then returned to them without any interruption in their studies and games, their political or sporting debates. “While I . . .” he thought. “Isn’t it her fault if I don’t want anything any more, not even her ? . . .”

A streak of mist, coming from space,

drifted in over the coast. It had been no larger than a small ravelled veil over the sea, a wandering mist that could scarcely conceal a rocky islet. But a gust of wind had seized it, and whirled it giddily over the bay, where it hung moulded and impenetrable. Suddenly drowned in it, Philip choked in the vapour-bath, and saw sea, house, and beach disappear from sight. But, accustomed as he was to the vagaries of the coast, he waited for another wind to disperse it, and resigned himself to this limbo, this symbolic sightlessness, in the depths of which he could discern a still face, like a clear moon, with hair thrown back, and idle hands that hardly stirred. "She's static . . . but let her give me back the wings of time, let her give me back the spurs of curiosity and impatience. . . . It isn't fair . . . it isn't fair. . . . I hate her . . ."

He worked himself up to a state of revolt and ingratitude. A boy of his

years does not realise that, in the path of those who are designed by love to become lovers too eager for life and too restless for death, an inexorable law sets fair apostles, the weight of whose carnality stops time, lulls the spirit to sleep, and bids the body ripen in its shade.

As suddenly as though a cloth had been lifted from a field, the mist was withdrawn, sucked up into the sky, leaving a wet glimmer on every blade of grass, a pearly dew on the downy leaves, a shining surface on the smooth ones.

The September sun threw a clear yellow on the sea that was blue in the distance, green where it rippled over shoals of sand near the shore.

As the mist cleared away, Philip breathed in with the sense of having come out of a stuffy corridor into light and space. He turned round to see the golden gorse swaying in the clefts of the

rock, and gave a start when he found a small boy standing silently behind him, apparently wafted thither and forgotten by the mist.

“What do you want, kid? Aren’t you the son of the woman who sells us fish?”

“Yes,” said the child.

“Wasn’t there anyone in the kitchen? Are you looking for somebody?”

‘The little boy shook the dust out of his red hair.

“The lady told me to . . .”

“What lady?”

“She said: ‘Go and tell Monsieur Phil that I’ve gone away.’ . . .”

“What lady said that?”

“I don’t know what lady, only she said: ‘Go and tell Monsieur Phil that I’ve had to leave to-day.’”

“Where did she tell you that? Did you meet her on the road?”

“Yes—she was in her car.”

“In her car. . . .”

Philip closed his eyes for a second,

passed his hand over his forehead, and whistled beneath his breath : “ . . . in her car. . . . I see . . . in her car. . . . ” He opened his eyes, looked for the messenger who was no longer standing there, and thought he must be the victim of one of those crudely-outlined, brutally-erased dreams begotten by noonday sleep. But then he caught sight of the ill-omened child walking away up the cliff-path, his red hair and the square bluish patch on his trousers showing up distinctly.

Philip assumed an air of stupid indifference, as if the small Breton urchin could still see him.

“ That’s that . . . what’s the odds if she *has* gone ? She was going, anyhow, so what does it matter if it’s a day sooner or later . . . ? ”

He was conscious of a curious sensation of growing sickness at the pit of his stomach, almost entirely physical. He let it get a stronger hold on him, bending

his head with a knowing look as though he were listening to some secret council.

“Perhaps on my bike. . . . But suppose she’s not alone? . . . I never thought of asking the kid if she was alone. . . .”

A distant klaxon horn hooted on the road. The long-drawn-out, solemn sound caused a momentary suspension of the pain that gripped him, the pain that was like the swaying of a swing deep down in his vitals. . . .

“At any rate, that stops any fuss about whether I should go and see her to-night or not. . . .”

Suddenly he thought of Ker-Anna shuttered in the moonlight ; he thought of the iron gate, the geraniums behind the railings, and shivered. He threw himself down in a depression of the dry field, writhing like a puppy in the throes of distemper, and began steadily scratching up the sandy grass with his feet. He shut his eyes, for the procession

of huge ballooning white clouds was making him feel giddily sick. Rhythmically he scratched up the grass, moaning in time to his movements, in the way that a woman in labour rocks the unborn child in her body, groaning with increasing volume until the birth-cry is torn from her.

Confounded, Philip opened his eyes, and came back to reality.

“What’s up? . . . What’s the matter with me? I knew all the time that she had to leave before we did. I’ve got her Paris address and her ’phone number . . . and, anyway, what do I care if she *has* gone? She was my mistress, not my beloved . . . I can live without her.”

He sat down, and, pulling the climbing snails that cows love to eat from the grass-stalks, picked them out of their shells. He forced himself to coarse laughter.

“She’s gone. What about it? She hasn’t gone alone, I bet . . . she didn’t

enjoy telling me about her love-affairs, oh, no ! . . . So that's that. Alone or not alone, she's gone. And what have I lost, anyway ? One night—to-night. The night before we leave. A night that I wasn't even sure that I wanted to spend with her a little while ago. I was only thinking about Vinca. . . . Oh, well, we shall have a jolly evening. . . . ”

But a cold breath blew on his spirit, and swept away his gutter-talk, his false confidence, his mocking words, leaving behind it a mind empty but for the clear comprehension of all that Camille Dalleray's departure meant to him.

“ Oh, she's gone . . . she's out of reach, the woman who gave me . . . who gave me. . . . Oh, how can I put into words what it was she gave me ? She's the only person who's ever given me anything since I believed in Santa Claus. She was the only one who could

take away from me, and now she's taken away from me. . . .”

His sunburnt face flushed darkly, and his eyes pricked with tears. He flung his shirt open over his bare chest, and ran his fingers through his hair, lashing himself on until he looked as though he had broken from the boxing-ring, panted wildly, and screamed aloud in a hoarse, childish voice :

“ It was just to-night I wanted ! ”

Propped on his elbows, he raised his head, and stared towards the invisible Ker-Anna ; a mass of cloud in the south was already blotting out the summit of the deserted hill, and Philip flung himself eagerly on the thought that an all-powerful avenging spirit was suppressing that corner of the world where he had known Camille Dalleray.

A few steps below him, on the path of crumbling sand (where flat stones and logs of wood that had been set up to form a rustic flight of steps collapsed

twenty times a year on to the beach), somebody coughed. Philip saw a greying head appear on a level with the meadow and move slowly upwards. With the powers of dissimulation that all children possess, he swallowed down his fury (the fury of a man betrayed), masked the wild turmoil of his mind, and with silent calm awaited his father's coming.

"There you are, old man."

"Yes, father."

"All alone? Where's Vinca?"

"I don't know, father."

With hardly any difficulty, Philip played the part of a lovable sunburnt stripling. His father, standing before him, looked exactly as he always did—an amiable human apparition, rather woolly and indistinct, as were all those people whose names were not Vinca nor Philip nor Camille Dalleray. Philip waited patiently until his father had recovered his breath.

"Haven't you been fishing, father?"

"Fishing? Not I. I've been for a stroll. Lequerec caught a huge cuttlefish—its tentacles were as long as this stick. Extraordinary. If Lisette had seen it, she'd have screamed herself into a fit! You'd better look out when you're swimming."

"Oh, there's no risk, you know, father."

Philip was furious with himself for protesting in such a shrill hysterical voice. The prominent grey eyes gazed questioningly at him; he felt that the look his father gave him was frank and unveiled, free of that blank unseeingness behind which sons can hide their secrets in the bosom of the family, and he grew uneasy.

"Are you feeling depressed because we're going away, old man?"

"Because we're going away? . . . But . . ."

"Yes, because we're going away. If

you're at all like me, you'll feel the wrench a little more keenly each year.. Leaving the sea and the house and our friends. . . . You'll find out how rare it is to go away with the same friends summer after summer without feeling the separation . . . make the most of what's left, old man ; you've still got a couple of fine days. There are heaps of people worse off than you. . . . ”

But already, as he was speaking, he was retreating into those shadows from which he had emerged at a look, an ambiguous sentence. Philip took his arm to help him up the crumbling slope, treating him with that cold, pitiful consideration which a son displays for his father when that father is a staid, middle-aged man, and the son a turbulent youngster who has just discovered love and its physical torments, and who prides himself on being the one person in all the world who can suffer without crying for help.

At the foot of the terrace where the villa stood, Philip loosed his father's arm, and began clambering down to the beach, back to that isolated spot where, less than an hour ago, he had felt solitary and alone.

"Where are you off to now, old man?"

"I'm going down there, father. . . ."

"Are you in such a hurry? . . . Come and talk to me. I wanted to tell you about the villa. You know that the Ferrets and ourselves have decided to buy it. Yes, of course you know it—we've been discussing it openly for ages. . . ."

Philip said nothing, not daring to lie, nor daring to admit the mental deafness which kept him from grasping the family talks.

"Come along, and I'll tell you all about it. . . . My first idea is—and Ferret agrees with me—to add two storeyless wings to the villa, and the flat tops will make roof-gardens for the

best rooms on the first floor. . . . Do you grasp what I mean ? ”

Philip nodded his head with an intelligent air, and did his best to pay attention. But, try as he would, he caught a murmur of . . . “ corbelling . . . ” and then lost the trend of what his father was saying, once more descending in imagination that slope where the ill-omened urchin had said . . . “ Corbelling . . . corbelling . . . I didn't hear what he said after corbelling. . . . ” He nodded again, and his eyes, filled with dutiful interest, went from his father's face to the Swiss roof of the villa, from the roof to his father's hand, which was tracing an architectural design in the air. “ Corbelling. . . . ”

“ You see what I mean ? That's what Ferret and I intend doing. Or perhaps you and Vinca will carry it out . . . in the midst of life, we are in death. . . . ”

"I can understand what he's saying," thought Philip to himself with a thrill of escape.

"Have I said anything funny? There's nothing to laugh at. You youngsters never attach any meaning to the word 'death.'"

"Yes, we do, father. . . ."

("Death . . . an ordinary, intelligible word . . . an everyday word. . . .")

"Most likely you'll marry Vinca when you're older. Your mother's convinced of it. But it's just as likely that you won't marry her. What are you smiling at?"

"I'm smiling at what you say, father. . . ."

("I'm smiling at what you say. I'm smiling at the ingenuousness of parents and staid grown-ups, and people who've 'lived.' I'm smiling at their simplicity, at their disturbing innocence. . . .")

"Remember, I'm not asking for your opinion at the moment. All you need

say is : ' I want to marry Vinca,' but if you say : ' I don't want to marry Vinca,' it won't affect me in the least."

" Won't it really make any difference to you ? "

" No—it isn't serious yet. You're a lovable youngster, but. . . . "

The prominent eyes again emerged from the shadow to scan Philip closely.

" But you've got to wait. Vinca won't have much of a dowry. But that doesn't matter. You can go without silk and velvet and gold to begin with. . . . "

(" Velvet and silk and gold . . . oh, velvet, silk, and gold . . . red, black, white—red, black, white—and the cube of ice, cut like a diamond, in the glass of water . . . *my* velvet, *my* splendour, *my* mistress, and *my* master. . . . Oh, how can I do without them ? . . . ")

" . . . work . . . hard beginning . . . serious. . . . Time to think about . . . in these days. . . . "

(" Something's hurting me at the pit

of my stomach. I'm afraid, afraid of this cruel rock where I stand and look down at the dull red, black, and white abyss that I see in myself. . . .")

" . . . ' family life . . . coddled. . . . By Jove ! . . . have a good time first . . . old man . . . what's wrong with you ? " . . .

The voice, the intermittent words, were drowned in the murmur of rising waters. . . . Philip was conscious of nothing more than the gentle thud of something against his shoulder, and the pricking of dry grass against his cheek. Then the sound of several voices broke in on him again, making floating islands of reality above the regular pleasant lapping of the waters, and Philip opened his eyes. His head was resting on his mother's knees, and all the Shades, gathered about him, bent their mild faces over him. A handkerchief soaked in spirits of lavender touched his nostrils, and he smiled at Vinca, who made a barrier of gold and rosy amber and

crystalline blue between him and the Shades. . . .

“ Poor, dear boy ! ”

“ Didn’t I say that he wasn’t looking well ? ”

“ We were talking, he was standing just there, and then all of a sudden——”

“ He’s just like every boy of his age ; he stuffs his pocket with fruit, and thinks he can eat anything. . . . ”

“ And what about the cigarettes he’s begun smoking—don’t they affect him ? ”

“ Poor darling—he’s got tears in his eyes. . . . ”

“ It’s the reaction. . . . ”

“ I called you thirty seconds after it happened. We were talking, I tell you ; he was standing just there, and then. . . . ”

Philip sat up, his face cold, feeling light and insubstantial.

“ Keep quiet for a bit.”

“ Lean on me, old man. . . . ”

But he held Vinca's hand, and smiled vaguely.

"It's all over now, thanks, mother. I'm all right again."

"Wouldn't you like to go and lie down?"

"Oh, no, I'd rather be out here in the air. . . ."

"How funereal Vinca's looking! Cheer up, Vinca; he isn't dead yet. Take him away with you, but keep him as long as possible on the terrace."

The Shades drifted away in a cluster, waving friendly hands to Phil, and calling out cheerily; his mother turned back with another tender look, and Philip was left alone with an unsmiling Vinca. He tried to rouse her with a turn of his head, a curve of his lips, but she would not respond, and stared steadily at Philip, whose sunburn had taken on a greenish tint. She stared at his hair, on which the sun had thrown a glint of red, at his close-set teeth gleaming

between his parted lips. . . . "How beautiful you are . . . how miserable I am!" said Vinca's blue eyes. . . . But he could read no pity in them, and she let him hold her hand, hardened with fishing and tennis, as though it were the handle of a stick. . . . "Let's go somewhere quiet. I want to explain to you. . . . It's nothing at all . . ." entreated Philip in a whisper.

She followed him, and they gravely chose as their secret chamber a rocky mound where the high tide that occasionally swept over it had left a coarse-grained, quickly-dried sand. Neither of them would have dreamed of exchanging confidences behind light cretonne curtains, between pitch-pine walls so thin that, at night, a cough, a switch being turned off, a key rattling in a lock, could be heard from one room to another. They were primitive enough, these two children, to escape from the peopled house, and seek an open

meadow or a rocky eyrie where their idyll and their tragedy might be safe from prying ears and eyes.

"It's four o'clock," said Philip, consulting the sun. "Wouldn't you like me to fetch you some tea before we get settled?"

"I'm not hungry—do you want any tea?" said Vinca.

"No, thanks. That fainting-fit spoilt my appetite. You sit down in the hollow—I'm all right up here."

They spoke with extreme simplicity, knowing that words of grave portent, or an equally revelatory silence, must soon follow.

The September sun shone on Vinca's smooth brown legs crossed at the hem of her white frock. Beneath them, the ground-swell, calmed down by the passing mist, rippled gently, and gradually took on its fine-weather hues. Seagulls wailed, and a string of fishing-smacks drifted away, sail after sail, out of the

shadow of the Meinga towards the open sea. A shrill, quivering childish song, echoed in the wind ; Philip turned round, started, and uttered a small exclamation of annoyance ; at the very top of the steepest cliff was a little red-haired boy in a bluish jacket. . . .

Vinca followed his eyes.

“ Yes,” she said, “ that’s the little boy.”

Philip became cool again.

“ I suppose you’re talking about the fishwoman’s little boy ? ”

Vinca shook her head.

“ That’s the little boy who was talking to you just now,” she corrected.

“ Who . . . ”

“ The little boy who told you that the lady had gone away.”

Suddenly Philip hated the glare of daylight, the sand that felt hard against his ribs, the wind that stung his cheek.

“ What—what are you talking about, Vinca ? ”

She disdained a reply, and went on :

“ The little boy was looking for you ; he met me and gave me the message first. Besides . . . ”

She wound up with a fatalistic gesture. Philip drew a deep breath with a kind of relief.

“ Ah . . . then you knew . . . what did you know ? ”

“ I knew about you . . . I haven't known long. . . . What I know, I knew all at once about . . . three or four days ago . . . but I still didn't believe . . . ”

She stopped, and under her blue eyes, on the childish cheeks, Philip saw the trace of night-shed tears and sleeplessness, that sheen, satiny as moonlight, that is only seen on the eyelids of women who suffer in secret.

“ I'm glad you know,” said Philip. “ Now we can talk, unless you'd rather not. . . . I'll do as you like.”

She pressed her quivering lips together, but no tears fell.

“ We’ll talk—it’s better.”

Both experienced a bitter satisfaction in leaving the common ground of quarrel and untruth behind them with the first words they exchanged. Only heroes, clowns, and children can feel at ease in a rarefied atmosphere. These children hoped desperately that an exalted sorrow might be born of their love.

“ Listen, Vinca ; when I met her for the first time . . . ”

“ No, no,” she interrupted hurriedly. “ Not that, I don’t want you to tell me that. I know about that—it was on the sea-wrack road. Do you think I’ve forgotten ? ”

“ But there was nothing in it then to forget or remember,” protested Philip.

“ Stop, I say, stop ! Do you think I brought you here so that you could talk to me about *her* ? ”

At Vinca’s sharp words, he felt that.

his voice had altogether been lacking in genuineness and contrition.

“ You want to tell me the history of your affair, don’t you ? It’s not worth while. When you came in last Wednesday, I was up, though my lamp wasn’t lit . . . I saw you . . . like a thief in the night. . . . It was almost daylight. I saw your face . . . and then I knew. . . . Don’t you think everything’s known in this place ? It’s only relations that don’t know. . . . ”

Philip frowned with a sense of shock. He was repelled by the deep-seated feminine cruelty that jealousy had roused in her. When he had reached the rocky shelter, he had felt ready to make half-confidences ; he had felt like shedding tears ; had been moved, in fact, to pour out long confessions. . . . But he could not brook this sharp outburst, this sudden violence that destroyed the romantic and flattering calm, and portended—what ?

"I suppose she'll want to kill herself," he thought. "She wanted to kill herself in this very place once before. . . . She'll want to kill herself. . . ."

"Vince, you must promise me . . ."

She listened, without looking at him, and in this one small act of restraint her body expressed a world of irony and independence.

"Yes, Vince. . . . You must promise me that you won't—either here or anywhere else—try and commit suicide. . . ."

She dazzled him with a quick and steady glance of her blue eyes.

"What did you say? Commit . . . commit suicide?"

He put his hands on her shoulders, and his brow was weighty with knowledge.

"I understand you, dearest. Six weeks ago, for no reason at all, you tried to slide over the edge, and now . . ."

While he was speaking, her eyes filled

with incredulous amazement. She shook Philip's hands from her shoulders.

“Die . . . now ? . . . Why should I die ? . . .”

He flushed at her question and Vinca took his blush as an answer.

“Die because of her ? ” she cried.
“Are you mad ? ”

Philip tore up tufts of the scanty grass, and suddenly seemed to grow four or five years younger.

“Everybody's mad who tries to find out what a woman wants, everybody's mad who thinks she knows what she wants herself ! ”

“But I know what I want, Philip. I know exactly what I want. And I know what I don't want, too. You needn't worry ; I shan't kill myself on her account. Six weeks ago . . . yes, I was letting myself slide over the edge, and I was dragging you with me. But that day I was dying for you, for you and me . . . for me . . .”

She closed her eyes, threw back her head, and spoke the last words with lingering tenderness ; she looked, with a strange exactness, as every woman looks who throws back her head and closes her eyes in an excess of joy. For the first time, Philip recognised in Vinca a kinship to her who, with closed eyes and head thrown back, seemed to be farthest away from him at the moment when he held her closest. . . .

“ Vinca—listen, Vinca.”

She opened her eyes, and straightened herself.

“ What is it ? ”

“ Don’t look like that—you look as though you’re going to faint.”

“ I’m not going to faint. You’re the one that needs smelling-salts and eau-de-Cologne and all the rest of it.”

From time to time, a childish anger intervened pitifully between them. They gained strength from it, steeped themselves in an anachronistic clarity, and

then rushed headlong towards the follies of their elders.

“I’m off,” said Philip, “You are making me very unhappy.”

Vincá gave the abrupt, mirthless laugh of every hurt woman.

“What a sweet thought ! Now you’re the one that’s being made unhappy, aren’t you ? ”

“Yes, I am.”

She uttered a sudden shrill cry of irritation, so unexpected that Philip started.

“What’s the matter with you ? ”

She was leaning on her hands, almost on all fours like an animal. He saw that she was completely beside herself, scarlet with anger. Her parted hair tumbled over her bent face, and only her dry red mouth, her small nose, the nostrils dilated with anger, and her flaming blue eyes were visible.

“Shut up, Phil ! Shut up ! I *will* hurt you. You grumble and talk about

your unhappiness, when it's you who've deceived me, you who are a liar, a liar, you who left me for another woman. You haven't any shame or common sense or pity. You dragged me up here to tell me—*me*—what you did with that other woman! Deny it! Deny it! Deny it, can't you?"

In her woman's anger, she was screaming aloud like a stormy petrel. She collapsed again to a sitting attitude, and her restless hands found a fragment of rock, which she hurled into the sea with a violence that confounded Philip.

"Be quiet, Vinca. . . ."

"No, I won't be quiet. We're all alone, anyway, and if I want to scream, I *shall* scream! Isn't there enough to scream about? You dragged me here to go over everything that you've done with her, for the pleasure of hearing your own words . . . for the pleasure of talking about her and saying her name. . . ."

She suddenly struck him in the face with her fist, so unexpectedly and boyishly that he was on the verge of retaliation. But he was stopped by the words she had shouted at him, and his innate masculine sense of decency recoiled before Vinca's unvarnished avowal of understanding.

"She believes, she really believes that it would give me pleasure to tell her about . . . Oh, and it's Vinca, Vinca who imagines such a thing. . . ."

She was speechless for a moment, checked by a fit of coughing that left her scarlet to the base of her throat. Two tears gushed from her eyes, but she had not yet reached the softening silence of tears.

"And all the time I never guessed what she was thinking," thought Philip. "Everything she's said is as amazing as that strength I've noticed in her when she's swimming or jumping or throwing stones. . . ."

He watched her warily, suspicious of her movements. The half-sweet anguish that a little while ago had stretched her motionless on the grass was banished to a far plane by the gleam of her eyes and her clear skin, by the poise of her slender figure and the white frock folded above her slim legs.

He took advantage of the lull, and attempted to show his superior self-control.

"I didn't hit you, Vinca. What you said asked for it more than your . . . But I didn't want to hit you. It would be the first time I'd ever allowed myself to do such a thing. . . ."

"Oh, of course," she interrupted hoarsely. "You'd hit anyone rather than me. I shall never be first in anything!"

Her overwhelming jealousy reassured him. He would have smiled had not Vinca's vindictive expression warned him against it. They remained silent,

watching the sun sink behind the Meinga, while, on the summit of the clouds, there quivered a petal-shaped patch of rose.

On top of the cliff the cow-bells tinkled, and where the ill-omened little boy had stood humming a short while ago there now appeared the horned head of a bleating black goat.

“ Vinca, dearest . . . ” sighed Philip.

She looked at him indignantly.

“ How dare you call me that ? ”

He bent his head.

“ Vinca, darling,” he sighed again.

Not daring to speak, she bit her lip, struggling against the rising tears that brought a lump into her throat and stung her eyes. Philip, leaning his head against the rock, overgrown with short, purplish moss, stared at the sea, in all probability without seeing it. Because he was exhausted, because the evening was so lovely, because the hour, its scent and its sadness, made it imperative,

he whispered : " Vinca darling . . . " as though he were whispering : " How happy I am . . . " or : " How unhappy I am. . . . "

His new-found grief found utterance in the oldest words of all, in the first words that came to his lips, just as the veteran, dying in battle, groans out the name of his long-forgotten mother.

" Shut up, you beast, shut up . . . what are you doing to me ? Oh, what are you doing to me ? "

She turned her face towards him, streaming with tears that left no traces on her velvety cheeks. The sun played in her loosened hair, and deepened the blue of her eyes. A love that had been wounded to the heart, a love that was strong enough to forgive everything, irradiated her brow ; her mouth and her quivering chin were those of a sorrowful small girl, a little laughable in her complete abandon.

Still leaning his head on the hard

pillow, Philip turned his dark eyes on her, with their softened expression of weary appeal. Anger had drawn all the fragrance of a golden girl from the over-excited child, a fragrance like pink-flowered rest-harrow, like crushed green corn, a sharp and pungent fragrance that completed that impression of strength which characterised Vinca's every gesture for Philip.

"What a wild creature you are," he said below his breath, with the loving inflections that he might have kept for a stranger.

"I'm wilder than you think . . . " she answered in the same tones as his.

"Don't say that!" cried Philip.
"Every word sounds like a threat!"

"*Before*, you would have said 'like a promise,' Phil."

"It's exactly the same thing," he protested vehemently.

"Why is it the same thing?"

"Because it is."

He chewed a blade of grass, determined to be tactful, and feeling incapable, moreover, of asserting his rights to freedom of thought and the telling of convenient untruths, rights that he was entitled to by his age and his first affair.

"I wonder how you'll behave to me later on, Phil. . . ."

She seemed overwhelmed and empty of argument, but Phil knew how she could rebound and magically gather her strength together.

"Don't ask that," he said shortly.

("Later on . . . later on . . . the future's already mortgaged . . . how lucky she is to be able to think about what the future holds at this stage . . . it's her need of someone to cling to that makes her talk like that . . . she's miles away from any idea of dying. . . .")

He angrily refused to recognise that will to survive which has devolved on woman; he ignored that imperious

instinct that causes her to dwell in sorrow, exploiting it as though it were a mine of treasure. Under the influence of his exhaustion and the melancholy of the evening, he felt worn out by this pugnacious child who was battling in so primitive a manner for the safety of a pair of lovers. In imagination, he tore himself out of her sight, and dashed in pursuit of a car speeding along in a cloud of dust ; like a tramp, he reached its window, against which leaned a head muffled in the white veils of a turban-shaped hat . . . he saw once more every detail of that face : the darkened lids, a mole near the lips, the narrow, swelling nostrils, details that he had always seen so close—so very close. . . . Lost and afraid, he got to his feet, filled with the terror of further suffering, filled with surprise at the discovery that, while he had been talking to Vinca, he had ceased to suffer. . . .

“ Vinca ! ”

“ What’s the matter with you ? ”

“ I think—I think I’m going to ill. . . . ”

An impetuous arm seized his, and pushed him down to the safest part of the steep nest, for he had been swaying near the edge. Utterly worn out, he made no struggle, only saying :

“ Perhaps, all the same, it would be the easiest way out. . . . ”

“ Oh, hush, hush ! . . . ”

After his feeble outcry, she gave up seeking for words. She rested his weary body against hers, and pressed his dark head close to her breasts that were newly rounding. . . . Philip surrendered himself to her soft arms with a slackness and lack of resistance that were new to him ; but though he sought with almost unendurable bitterness for the resinous scent, that other yielding bosom, he moaned effortlessly : “ Vinca, dearest . . . Vinca darling. . . . ”.

She began rocking him, her knees pressed together, her arms cradling him, with that rhythm known to every woman in the world. She wished that he would lose consciousness, and forget, in his delirium, a woman's name. In her thoughts, she said to him : “. . . you'll learn to understand me . . . I'll make you see . . .” but at the same time she smoothed back a lock of black hair that looked like a thin fissure in the marble of his forehead. She was sensing the weight, the new contact of his body, a body that only yesterday she had carried straddled on her back, laughing and running. When Philip half-opened his eyes and sought her look, begging her to give him back what he had lost, she struck the sand with her free hand, and cried out within herself : “ Oh, why were you born ? ” like the heroine of the eternal triangle.

And yet all the while she was keeping a sharp lookout on the surroundings of

the distant villa ; like a sailor, she gauged the time by the sinking sun : .
“ It’s after six.” She watched Lise^{te} walking between the beach and the house, looking like a white pigeon in her fluttering frock. She thought : “ We mustn’t stay for more than a quarter of an hour, or else they’ll come and look for us. I must bathe my eyes. . . .” Then she re-assembled soul and body, love and jealousy, and anger slow to cool, those mental refuges as strange and primitive as the nest in the rocks. . . .

“ Get up,” she murmured.

Philip protested plaintively, and made himself heavier. She realised that he was shielding himself with lamentations and inertia from questions and reproaches. Her arms, which a moment ago had been almost maternal, shook his bent neck, his warm body, and, once out of her embrace, her burden became once more the liar, the little-known stranger,

capable of betraying her, smoothed and changed by a woman's hands.

“ If only I could fasten him up like that black goat with two yards of rope . . . shut him up in a room, my room . . . live in a country where I was the only woman. . . . Or if only I were beautiful, so beautiful that. . . . If only he were just ill enough for me to nurse him. . . .” The drift of her thoughts was reflected on her face.

“ What are you going to do ? ” asked Philip.

Without any illusions, she contemplated the features which would some day be those, no doubt, of an averagely good-looking man, but which his sixteen years had not yet characterised with manhood. She wondered that a mark of shame, whose meaning was plain, was not graven on the smooth chin, and the straight nose quick to express anger. “ But, oh, I can tell from his eyes that a woman has looked

into them. . . .” She raised her head.

“What am I going to do? I’m going to hurry back to dinner, and so are you.”

“And is that all?”

She was on her feet, pulling down her dress under the elastic silk belt, and gazing earnestly at Philip, the house, and the sea, which lay almost motionless, and whose cold grey tints refused to take on the glow of sunset.

“That’s all—unless you’re going to do anything.”

“Do anything—what do you mean?”

“I mean—go away and find that lady . . . make up your mind that it’s her you love . . . tell your people . . .”

She spoke in a hard and childish voice, tugging mechanically at her frock as though she wanted to crush her breasts.

“Her breasts are like limpet-shells . . . or like those tiny pointed mountains you see in Japanese prints. . . .”

He blushed for having formulated the word "breasts," feeling that he had secretly insulted her.

"I shan't do anything so stupid, Vinca," he said hurriedly. "But what would you do, I wonder, if I were capable of doing even half as much as you suggest?"

"What should I do? I should go on living exactly as I'm living now."

She was lying and defying him, but beneath her mendacious look he discerned that unswerving constancy which upholds a woman in love, and binds her to life and her lover from that moment when she discovers that she has a rival.

"You're making yourself out to be more reasonable than you are, Vinca."

"And you're making too much of yourself. Didn't you think, a minute ago, that I wanted to die? Die, because my lord has an affair!"

She pointed at him with her outflung hand, as quarrelling children do.

“An affair . . .” repeated Philip, hurt and flattered. “Good Lord, all boys of my age . . .”

“I suppose I shall have to get used to knowing that you do exactly the same things as they do,” interrupted Vinca.

“Vinca darling, a girl like you oughtn’t to speak about or listen to such things as . . .”

He lowered his eyes, bit back the words in time, and added : “You must believe me.”

He took Vinca’s hand to help her over the slaty slabs that lay outside their shelter, and over the low bushes of broom that separated them from the Customs House path. Three hundred yards away, Lisette, twirling like a convolvulus in her white frock, signalled and semaphored to them from the sea-meadow : “Hurry up ! You’re late !”

Vinca signalled that they were coming, but she looked back again at Phil before beginning the downward climb.

“ Phil, I just can’t believe you. If it’s true, then our lives together have been just like one of those silly little stories in the books we don’t like. You say : ‘ A boy . . . a girl . . . ’ when you’re talking about us. You say : ‘ An affair, like all boys of my age . . . ’ but, all the same, you’re quite wrong, Phil . . . I’m talking quite quietly, you see. . . . ”

He listened, feeling a little impatient and perplexed, for at the same time he was seeking in vain to re-assemble his scattered sensations of pain. Vinca’s exceeding embarrassment, visible beneath her lack of assurance, diffused them still more, and the night-wind was blowing up with a threatening briskness. . . .

“ Well, what else have you got to say ? ”

“ You made a great mistake, Phil,

because you ought to have asked *me* to . . .”

He felt empty of desire ; he was tired out, and full of a longing to be alone, yet he was dreading the on-coming night. She had expected an outcry, indignation, or a shamed uneasiness ; he looked at her from head to foot through half-closed eyes and said :

“ Poor little thing. . . . ‘ Ask you ’ ? . . . And then . . . you would give—what ? ”

He saw her wounded silence, saw a dark flush rise to her cheeks and spread crimson beneath the sunburn of her breast. He put an arm about her shoulders, and, pressed close against her, walked along the path.

“ Vinca darling, don’t you see what stupid things you’re saying ? Things that a girl like you can’t understand, thank God ! ”

“ Thank Him for something else

Phil. Don't you think I know as much as the first woman He created ? ”

She did not draw away from him, but looked at him sideways, then stared in front of her at the difficult path, then back at Philip, whose attention was fixed on this angle of her eye, showing now periwinkle-blue, now white like the pearly inside of a shell.

“ Tell me, Phil, don't you believe I know as much as . . . ”

“ Hush, Vinca. You don't know. You don't know anything. ”

At the bend in the path, they stopped. All the blue had fled from the almost-motionless sea, leaving it grey and leaden ; on the horizon, the setting sun had left a long streak of sombre rose, above which was a belt of cold green, paler than dawn, where the first wan star was drowning. Philip tightened one arm about Vinca's shoulders, and stretched the other towards the waves.

"Hush, Vinca. You don't know anything. It's a . . . it's a secret . . . so big that . . ."

"I'm big."

"No, you don't understand what I'm trying to say . . ."

"Yes, I do understand. You're just like the Jallons' little boy, the one who's in the choir. He tries to impress us by saying : 'Latin. . . . Oh, well, you know, Latin's jolly difficult,' but he doesn't know a word of Latin !"

She laughed suddenly, her head raised, and Philip took exception to this easy and natural transition from grave to gay, from dismay to irony. Possibly because night was falling, he began to long for that stillness, shot with sensual fires, that silence when the blood beating in his ears made a noise like rushing rain ; he began to long again for the terror of that almost-wordless, danger-filled attraction that had drawn him over a threshold, across which other

young men stagger with laughter and blasphemy.

“Be quiet, Vinca. Don’t be spiteful and coarse. When you *do* know . . .”

“But I want to know. . . .”

She spoke hysterically, and gave an awkward giggling laugh, so as to conceal that her whole being was apprehensive, and that she was as wretched as are all those scorned children who try and discover in the gravest peril an opportunity for more and more suffering, and yet more, until the climax is reached. . . .

“Please stop, Vinca. You’re hurting me . . . it’s so unlike you. . . .”

He let his arm fall from her shoulders, and hurried on towards the villa. She kept pace with him, jumping over tufts of spiky grass, already wet with dew, when the path grew narrow. She was assuming an expression suitable to the Shades all the while that she repeated below her breath to Philip :

“ So unlike me ? So unlike me ? . . .
That’s one thing that you don’t know,
Phil, although you know so many other
things. . . . ”

.

They were at dinner, and had assumed a dignity suitable to themselves and their secrets. Philip laughed over his “ vapours,” and drew the attention to himself, fearing that Vinca’s brilliant eyes, rimmed with dull red, would be noticed. For her part, Vinca acted the child ; after dessert, she clamoured for champagne. “ It will do Phil good, mother ! ”—and she emptied her glass of Pommery at a gulp.

“ Vinca ! ” reproved a Shade.

“ Let her alone,” said another Shade indulgently. “ What harm do you think it will do her ? ”

Towards the end of dinner, Vinca saw Philip’s eyes look out to sea towards the invisible Meinga, in search of the white

road, the dust-wilted junipers that the night hid.

“Lisette !” she called. “Give Phil a pinch—he’s falling asleep.”

“She’s drawn blood,” groaned Philip. “Spiteful little thing ! She’s made the tears come !”

“It’s true, it’s true !” cried Vinca shrilly. “She’s made you cry !”

She laughed as he rubbed his arm beneath the white flannel shirt, but he saw the heady effect of the champagne on her cheeks and in her eyes, and he was aware of a suppressed excitement in her which was far from reassuring.

A little later, a far-off syren wailed over the dark water, and one of the Shades stopped clattering the dominoes on the polished table.

“There’s a fog at sea. . . .”

“The Granville lighthouse was floating in mist a short while ago,” said another Shade.

But the wail of the syren had suggested

the hooting of a klaxon-horn on the road, and Philip leapt to his feet.

"He's going to faint again!" taunted Vinca.

Clever at concealment, she turned her back on the Shades, and the look she gave Philip was like a cry of anguish. . . .

"No, I'm not," said Philip. "But I'm fagged out—do you mind if I go to bed? . . . Good night, mother. Good night, father. Good night, Madame Ferret. Good night . . ."

"We'll let you off the rest of the litany to-night, old man."

"How about sending you up a cup of weak camomile tea?"

"Don't forget to open your window wide."

"Vinca, did you put your bottle of smelling-salts in Phil's room?"

The voices of the friendly Shades followed him to the door, suggesting a slightly-faded tutelary wreath of dried herbs that exhaled a faint colourless

perfume. He gave Vinca his customary kiss, which invariably glanced off her proffered cheek and alighted near her ear, her neck, or the downy corner of her mouth. Then the door shut, the garland of voices parted abruptly, and he was alone.

His room, wide open to the moonless night, struck chill. Standing beneath the lamp in its frilled yellow shade, he was distastefully aware of the odour that Vinca called "Boy's scent," an odour compounded of bound classics, leather cases packed ready for the morrow, rubber soles, toilet soap, and brilliantine.

He was not particularly unhappy. But he was conscious of a feeling of isolation and exhaustion which clamoured for total forgetfulness. He got into bed quickly, put out the light, and instinctively sought that place against the wall where, during childish illnesses and growing-pains, the night had proved

most protective, the coverlet had afforded him most shelter, and the flowered wallpaper had blossomed with dreams begotten by the full moon, the high tides, the July thunderstorms. He fell asleep at once, only to be assailed by the wildest confusions of chimera. Here he saw Camille Dalleray's body with Vinca's face ; there, Vinca held imperious sway over him with an illusive and shameful indifference. But in his dreams, both Camille Dalleray and Vinca refused to remember that he was only a helpless little boy, a small ten-year-old boy who only wanted to rest his head against a soft shoulder. . . .

He awoke, saw that his watch pointed to 11.45, and that his ruined night would burn away feverishly in the sleeping house : he put on his beach-shoes, knotted his bath-gown, and went downstairs.

The moon, in its first quarter, was on a level with the cliff. Sickle-shaped and

reddish, it shed no rays, and the revolving light of the Granville lighthouse seemed to extinguish it, now with a crimson, now with an emerald flare. But the moon diffused enough light to render visible the clustered trees, and between the beams of the villa the rough-cast seemed faintly phosphorescent. Philip left the French windows open, and stepped into the quiet night as though it were a sorrowful sanctuary waiting to receive him. He sat down on the terrace that defied the damp and was trampled down" and sunken by sixteen summer holidays, the terrace where Lisette's spade every now and then brought to light discoloured and mildewed fragments of toys that had lain buried for ten, twelve, fifteen years . . .

He felt desolate, filled with the wisdom of the ages, aloof.

"Perhaps it's because I've become a man," he thought.

He was vainly tormented by the unconscious desire to lay his wisdom and his desolation on an altar, tormented as are all honest atheists whose education has denied them God.

“Is that you, Phil?”

The voice came down to him like a leaf on the wind. He rose, and walked with noiseless steps to the window with the wooden balcony.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Aren’t you asleep?”

“Of course I’m not asleep. I’m coming down.”

Before he was aware of her intention, she had joined him. All he could see was a luminous face above a silhouette that melted into the surrounding darkness.

“You’ll be cold.”

“No, I won’t. I’ve just put on my blue kimono. Besides, it’s warm. Don’t let’s stay here.”

“Why aren’t you asleep?”

“I’m not sleepy. I’ve been thinking.

Don't let's stay here—we shall wake someone up."

"You can't go down to the beach at this time of night. You'll catch cold."

"I never catch cold. But I don't mind about the beach. I'd just as soon walk a little way up the hill."

She spoke with no definite intonations but Philip caught every word. The uncharacterised voice filled him with delight. It was not Vinca's voice, or the voice of any one woman. It was just an expression, devoid of bitterness, of that small, almost invisible presence, an expression that formulated nothing but the suggestion of a stroll, hinted at nothing beyond the quiet night. . . .

He stumbled against something, and Vinca steadied him with her hand.

"That's the geranium-pots—can't you see them?"

"No."

"I can't see them either. But I'm like a blind person, I can tell that they're

there . . . look out, there must be a trowel on the ground beside them."

"How do you know?"

"I've got a feeling it's there. And it would make a clatter like a coal-shovel falling. Crash! What did I tell you?"

Her whispered sentences enchanted Phil. He could have cried with relief at finding Vinca so sweet, just like the twelve-year-old Vinca in the darkness, the Vinca who had whispered to him, leaning on the wet sand, where the moonlight quivered on the bellies of fish during the midnight haul. . . .

"Do you remember, Vinca, when we caught that huge plaice at midnight?"

"And you caught bronchitis! After that, we were dared to go fishing at night again. . . . Listen . . . did you shut the French windows?"

"No. . . ."

"Can't you see that the wind's getting up, and the doors are banging? If I didn't think of everything. . . ."

She disappeared, to reappear like a sylph on such light feet that Philip was aware of her coming only by the scent that the wind wafted in advance of her. . . .

“How nice you smell, Vinca. What heaps of scent you’ve put on !”

“Don’t talk so loudly. I felt hot, so I sprayed myself before I came down.”

He made no comment, but his mind registered the fact that Vinca did, indeed, think of everything.

“Go through, Phil. I’m holding the gate open. Take care not to tread on the lettuces.”

One could forget the nearness of the sea in the kitchen-garden aroma that rose from the cultivated soil. A low clump of thyme rasped Philip’s legs, and he fingered the velvety snapdragon blossoms as he went past.

“Don’t forget, Vinca, that we can’t hear any noises from the house out here because of those trees.”

“But there aren’t any noises in the house, Phil. And we’re not doing any harm.”

She had just picked up a worm-eaten windfall. He heard her bite into it and then throw it away.

“What are you doing? Eating?”

“Only one of those yellow pears. But it wasn’t nice enough to give you.”

Her lack of constraint did not altogether put Philip at his ease. Vinca was a little too amenable, as serene and care-free as a disembodied spirit, and he suddenly wondered at this resurrection of gaiety, this aimless mirth, an echo of which is heard in the laughter of nuns. “I wish I could see her face,” he thought, and shuddered at the idea that the untroubled voice, the laughing, girlish words, could come from that convulsed mask, dark and flashing with anger, which had confronted him in the rocky nest. . . .

“I say, Vinca—let’s go in.”

“If you like. But let me have a minute, only one more minute. I’m happy. Aren’t you? We’re both happy. How easy it is to live at night-time. But not in a room. Oh, for the last few days I’ve hated my room. Out here, I don’t feel frightened. . . . Look, there’s a glow-worm—how late in the year to see one. No, don’t touch it. . . . You silly, why do you start like that? It’s only a cat creeping by. They go out at night after field-mice. . . .”

He heard a little laugh, and then Vinca’s arm tightened about his waist. He was listening to every breath, every rustle, his attention distracted, in spite of his uneasiness, by the vague murmuring that went off and on. Far from fearing the darkness, Vinca made her way through it as though it were a well-known, friendly country, and herself a blind hostess, explaining it to Philip, leading him on, and doing the honours of midnight.

" Vinca darling . . . let's go back. . . ."

She uttered a croaking little exclamation.

" You called me ' Vinca darling.' . . . Oh, why can't it always be night? You're not the person who deceived me now; I'm not the person who suffered such agony. . . . Oh, Phil, don't let's go in just yet; let me be a little happy, a little in love; let me be as sure of you now as I am in my dreams. Phil . . . Phil, you don't know me."

" Perhaps I don't, Vinca darling. . . ."

They were stumbling through a kind of hard stubble that snapped beneath their feet.

" It's the cut buckwheat," said Vinca.

" They threshed it yesterday."

" How do you know? "

" Didn't you hear the sound of the two flails while we were quarrelling yesterday? I heard it. Sit down, Phil."

(" She heard it? . . . She was beyond herself; she struck me in the face, and

hurled reproaches at me . . . but she heard the sound of the two flails. . . .”)

Involuntarily, he compared this keenness of all the feminine senses to another feminine alertness. . . .

“Don’t go, Phil! I haven’t been horrid to you—I haven’t cried, or reproached you. . . .”

Vinca’s round head, her silky hair, lay against Phil’s shoulder, her warm cheek took the chill from his own. . . .

“Kiss me, Phil—please, please kiss me.”

He kissed her, but with his joy there mingled the reluctance of extreme youth which aims at gratifying its own desires only, and the poignant memory of another kiss which had been not given, but taken.

But Vinca’s mouth, like a sun-ripened fruit, was against his own; her lips parted, she lavished their secret sweetness on him—and he swayed in the darkness. “Oh, God, let it happen,” he

thought. "Let it happen—it has to happen because she can't bear it otherwise. . . . Oh, God, how clinging and passionate and fatal her kisses have become since that first kiss. . . . Oh, let it happen, quickly, quickly. . . ."

But consummation is a miracle not so easily accomplished. An arm which he could not loosen clung ardently about his neck. He shook his head to free himself, and Vinca, in the belief that Phil wanted to break away from their kiss, clung closer still. At last he managed to grip her elbow near his ear, and fling her back on the stubble bed. She gave a little moan and lay still, but when he bent over her, she put her arms round him and pulled him down beside her. There followed a quiet interlude, each showing for the other a little of the pity and kindness of tried lovers. An invisible Vinca lay across Philip's arm, but his free hand stroked her skin, aware of its delicacy,

and of the sharp imprints of rocks and thorns. She attempted a laugh.

"Leave my beautiful grazes alone," she entreated. "This stubble's quite soft to lie on now. . . ."

But he caught the quiver in her voice, and trembled in turn. Incessantly he went back to that which he knew least of her—her mouth. As they both paused for breath, he determined to spring up and make a dash for the house. But as he drew away from Vinca, he was seized by a sensation of physical deprivation, by a horror of the cold air and his empty arms. He clasped her closely again, with an eagerness that she reciprocated, an eagerness that entwined their limbs. Strength came to him at last to call her "Vinca darling," in a shamed voice which both besought her to accede to and to forget that which he was asking of her. She understood, and gave him for answer an exhausted, almost angry, silence, a

sudden response in which she lost herself completely. He heard her short, shocked cry, felt her automatic convulsion, but the body that he was making his own made no movement of withdrawal, resolved on yielding itself utterly to him. . . .

XVII

He slept briefly and soundly, and went downstairs with the impression of being in an empty house. But outside he saw his fishing-tackle; the caretaker and his taciturn dog, and on the first floor he heard his father's early-morning cough. He hid himself between the spindle-tree hedge and the wall of the terrace, and watched Vinca's window. A brisk wind scattered and dissolved the clouds; turning towards the sea, Philip saw the Cancale fishing-smacks tossing on the choppy waves. All the windows of the house were still shuttered.

“Can she be asleep? After it’s happened, they’re always supposed to cry.. Perhaps Vinca’s crying now. She ought to be lying in my arms as she did when we were on the sands. Then I’d say to her: ‘It isn’t real—nothing’s happened. You’re just my Vinca, as you always were. You didn’t give me that happiness, which wasn’t such a very great happiness, after all. Nothing’s real, not even that sigh, not even that song that you began singing and suddenly cut short, leaving you as stiff and straight in my arms as though you were dead. . . . Nothing’s real. If I disappeared to the top of the white road towards Ker-Anna to-night, if I crept in alone before dawn to-morrow, I’d hide it so well that you’d never suspect . . . I’d say: ‘Let’s go for a walk on the cliff and take Lisette with us.’ ”

He did not realise that physical pleasure, awkwardly yielded and clumsily taken, will one day reach perfection.

His youthful idealism was only intent at the moment on rescuing what must not be allowed to perish . . . their fifteen enchanted years of devotion, their fifteen years of pure and unspotted love.

"I'd say to her : ' Don't you understand that our love, the love of Phil and Vinca, doesn't end on that hard bed of stubble ? It doesn't end in your room or mine. A woman, of whom I know nothing, gave me such joy that I still feel the thrill of it now that she's far away, just as the heart torn living from an eel still quivers ; if I feel like that for her, what can't our love do for us ? ' Oh, it's clear as crystal. . . . But if I'm wrong, you mustn't know I'm wrong. . . .

"I'd say to her : ' It's a dream come true too soon, a delirium, a torture during which you bit your hand, poor little thing, brave little lover. . . . For you, perhaps, it was only a nightmare,

but for me it was a deeper degradation, a joy less than the wonder of solitude. But nothing is changed if you forget, if I wipe out a memory already blotted out by the pitying night. . . . I never held your yielding body in my arms. . . . Let me ride on your back, and we'll run down to the sands. . . . ' "

He called up all his courage when he heard the curtains slipping back on the rods, and succeeded in not looking away. . . .

Vinca appeared between the shutters, which she folded back against the wall. She blinked several times, and looked out with quiet intentness. Then she ran her hands through her thick hair, and drew out a dry wisp from its disorder. . . . A smile and a blush dawned simultaneously on her face as she leant forward, looking, no doubt, for Philip. Wide awake now, she reached out for an earthenware watering-can, and began to water a purple fuchsia

which twined up the wooden balcony. She stared at the fresh blue sky which prophesied fine weather, and began to hum the song that she sang every day. Philip watched her from the spindle-tree hedge, like a man lying in wait to commit a rape.

"She's singing . . . I must believe my eyes and ears . . . she's singing, and she's just watered the fuchsia. . . ."

For the moment, he forgot that he should have rejoiced at seeing her as unchanged as he had hoped. He only realised how utterly he had been mistaken, and, too young to dissect his emotions, a comparison forced itself on him.

threw myself under her window one night because a revelation had crashed on me like a thunderbolt, splitting my life in two. And she's singing, she's singing. . . ."

Vinca's eyes vied with the blue of the sea. She was combing her hair, and a

vague smile hovered on her pouted lips murmuring their little song. . . .

"She's singing. She'll be gay and light-hearted at breakfast. She'll call out : 'Pinch him, Lisette, as hard as you can !' Nothing's happened to her one way or the other . . . she's untouched. . . ."

He saw that Vinca, stooping, was crushing her breast against the wooden balcony, and stretching herself towards his room.

"If she sees me at the next window, if I jump over the balcony to join her, she'll throw her arms round my neck. . . .

"Oh, you whom I called my 'master,' why did you sometimes seem more moved than that inexperienced little girl who looks just as she's always looked? You've gone away without explaining everything to me. If your only reason for loving me was your pride in giving to me, even then you'd be sorry for me for the first time to-day. . . ."

From the empty casement came a thin, joyous thread of song which failed to touch his heart. He did not realise that in a few weeks' time the child, who was now singing, might be standing doomed and panic-stricken at this seltsame window. He hid his face in the crook of his arm, and beheld his own insignificance, his downfall, his magnanimity : " I'm neither a hero nor a villain. . . . A little joy, a little pain . . . I shall have given her nothing but that . . . nothing, nothing but that. . . ."

THE END

